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Consumer Reports®



The Great GIFT GUIDE

TOP PRODUCTS* OF THE YEAR

BASED ON STYLE, PERFORMANCE, SAFETY & SUSTAINABILITY

*TVs, LAPTOPS, COFFEEMAKERS, CARS, SLOW COOKERS, HEADPHONES, SNOW BLOWERS, SMARTWATCHES & MORE

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CONTENTS

December 2015, Vol. 80 No. 12

THE GREAT GIFT GUIDE P. 15

PICK THE PERFECT PRESENT for everyone on your list by choosing among our expert-recommended products in every category.

For the Food Lover
Tasty treats they'll eat up.
P. 16

For the Movers & Shakers
Essentials for adventurers.
P. 40

For the Adventurous
Penguins, personal chefs, and roses, too.
P. 28

For the Pleasure-Seeker
Practical indulgences.
P. 48

For the Gadget Geek
When something shiny is all that'll do.
P. 32

For the Do-It-Yourselfer
The best tools to get stuff done.
P. 54



This retro-chic blender will jazz up any kitchen, p. 17.



A small camera to capture the big moments, p. 41.



A new ultralight laptop goes anywhere, p. 35.

Amp up their motivation with a new activity tracker, p. 33.

23 Giving So It Counts
Check out that charity before you donate.

24 That's a Wrap
Retailers who still offer gift packaging, plus our tests of recycled paper.

26 Play Your Cards Right
The best rewards cards.

36 Batteries Built to Last
The best AAs. RATINGS

37 Tops for Tech Shopping
Where to buy electronics. RATINGS

38 Best of the Baskets
Which services really deliver.

43 How to Avoid 'Regifting' Regrets
You can do it—carefully.

44 The Gift of Last Resort?
The deal with gift cards.

46 Should You Give a Car?
Our experts' advice.

53 No, *Really*, You Shouldn't Have
When gifts go bad.

57 Show Me the Money
Why cash is still king.

58 Many Happy Returns
Retailers that make it easy.



Video games that make figurines like these come to life, p. 34.

PHOTO, TOP: GETTY IMAGES

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARIS TSEVIS

CONTENTS

December 2015, Vol. 80 No. 12

IN EVERY ISSUE

5 From the President: We're Thankful for You
As we begin a new year together, we're ready to keep making a difference.

5 About the Cover

6 Your Feedback
Comments from readers.

8 Consumer Reports—Everywhere You Are
Read more online or on mobile.

THE UPDATE

10 Easy Ways to Boost Phone Storage
What to do when your device is full.

10 Game-Changing Printer May Save You Big Bucks
An early look at Epson's latest innovation.

11 Ask Our Experts
A car-insurance concern, a countertops conundrum, and antibiotics advice.

12 Get Involved
Actions you can take in December.

12 Recalls & Updates
The Volkswagen debacle, and more.

13 Scam Tracker
When a home-alarm system makes you a target.

13 Packaging Ploys
The high price of premium pasta–is it worth paying more?

14 Healthy You
What those food "expiration" dates really mean.



ROAD REPORT

62 The Most & Least Reliable New Cars
How more than 740,000 vehicles held up, according to our readers.

69 Who You Gonna Call?
What to do if you break down.

70 The Antidote for the Common Minivan
The Honda Pilot helps you carry it all and still look cool.
RATINGS

71 Not-Quite-Maximum Impact
The redesigned Nissan Maxima still falls short as a sporty sedan.
RATINGS



INDEX

74 A Year's Worth of Products

SELLING IT

75 Goofs and Gaffes

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We're Thankful for You



Marta L. Tellado, President and CEO
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The holiday season is a time for gratitude, and, here at Consumer Reports, our deepest thanks of all go out to you. After all, it's your support that makes our testing, investigative reports, and policy work possible. Your input allows us to stay nimble and meet the evolving needs of all consumers, and it's your dynamic feedback about product reliability that allows us to provide the trusted, data-driven analysis we've always delivered—including this month's auto reliability guide. One year into my leadership of CR, I'm continually grateful for the dedication and loyalty of our readers.

This month's gift-guide issue is a powerful reminder of why we feel so strongly about our work. You can't always know what you're really buying for yourself or your family until you've taken off the wrapping paper and examined products up close. That's what we're all about at CR—getting under the hood and pressure-testing goods and services so that you don't have to. Sometimes safeguarding your interests is as simple as letting you know which slow cooker will give your cousin the best bang for the buck. Sometimes it's more than that—determining which refrigerator will save on your energy bill, investigating which student loans have hidden terms that could drive your son or daughter into debt, or amplifying consumer voices calling for better, safer, and healthier choices in the marketplace. Everywhere we work—from our labs to our auto test track to the corridors of policy-making power—we're grateful that you're there with us, helping to peel back the wrappers with your input and support so that we can build a better marketplace together.

EVERYWHERE WE WORK—FROM OUR LABS TO OUR AUTO TEST TRACK TO THE CORRIDORS OF POLICY-MAKING POWER—WE'RE GRATEFUL THAT YOU'RE THERE WITH US.

About the Cover



The clever gift-box mosaics you see on the front and back covers of the issue you hold in your hands were made up of hundreds of tiny products of the sort we test every day. The products were crafted into images by Charis Tsevis, a visual designer based in Athens, Greece. The images convey the labor of love Consumer Reports performs all year long when we buy and test thousands of products to independently judge them for safety, performance, reliability, and sustainability. That's why we believe we are your unique and ultimate gift-guide experts.

What You Had to Say About Ground Beef, Health Insurance, and More



Food-Safety Concerns

Our October cover story, "Wanted: Safe Beef," sparked a lot of buzz via email and social media. In fact, at press time, we counted about 30,000 comments, likes, and shares. Here is a taste of the chatter:

I read with interest "How Safe is Your Beef?" (October 2015) but noted that nowhere was the question asked: "Why do we eat meat at all when a plant-based diet is healthier, better for the environment, and ends cruelty to slaughtered animals?" Contrary to mainstream opinion, modern vegetarians do not exist on bland diets of broccoli and tofu.
–Deronda Elliott, Durham, NC

So. Gross. Who ordered the poop burger?
–Laura Klein, @OrganicAuthorit, via Twitter, after reading that our tests found fecal matter in some ground-beef samples

I was disappointed that your cover story ("Wanted: Safe Beef," October 2015) made no mention of irradiation. While irradiation is not intended to replace other food-safety precautions, it is an effective last line of defense that eliminates most dangerous bacteria in beef and other foods before they reach consumers.
–John Chesser, Des Moines, IA
EDITOR'S NOTE We did publish our test findings on irradiated beef in 2002. Then and now, we believe that we need to address the root causes of the problem at the farm and processing plants before we seek Band-Aid solutions, such as irradiation, that can mask poor hygiene only to a point. And even a hamburger irradiated with the power of X-rays is not guaranteed to be free of all bacteria.

A Windfall for Your Planner?

"Is Your Financial Planner Getting Rich at Your Expense?" (October 2015) repeats wise advice, and I hope you do a follow-up about fee-only advisers. My wife and I recently interviewed three. The first dropped hints about kids in private schools and luxury cars. The second met us in a home office in a grand mansion and shared photos of their other house in a beach community. The qualifications for the third were a bachelor's degree and some coursework in a local college extension. Each of these quoted hourly rates of upwards of $200, much more than my wife and I make combined as college-educated professionals.
–Les Brockmann, Granada Hills, CA

If I ever get enough spare cash to invest (outside of maxing out my retirement savings–as if!), then I might pay for expert advice on individual stocks & taxes. I just research like mad, keep it simple, and make decisions I am willing to live with.
–Jo Hickey Russell, via Facebook

Driving-Safety Reminder

"Hidden Helpers in Your Phone" (October 2015) says that the Waze traffic-navigation app might be for you "if you want to avoid being ticketed by aggressive police officers." It also offers "updates on speed traps, red-light cameras, and other hazards of the road." Law enforcement doing their job and red-light cameras are "hazards of the road"? If one simply obeys the law, lives would be saved, and there would be no need for such an app.
–Chris Biegler, Wetumpka, AL

Keep Cutting the Cord

We heard from hundreds of readers in response to our coverage of the high cost of cable TV, including "The Hidden Cost of Cable" (November, 2015). Two examples:

Between my antenna, a Roku 3, and the Internet, I have no need for pay TV.
–Patricia Mitchell, via Facebook

The only reason I keep cable is for sports. If I could watch all the games elsewhere, I would get rid of it.
–Luke French, via Facebook

Used-Car Buyer Beware

I am finally catching up on past issues and found "10 Old-Car Red Flags" (June 2015). I recently bought a used car from a dealer of another automaker. I thought I had done all my homework and was pleased with the car. Imagine my surprise when recently, as I turned a corner, the locked passenger door opened. Fortunately it was only a library book that flew out and not something more critical. After several more turns and trying to keep it locked, I bungee corded through open windows and took it to the manufacturer dealer. Not only had a pending recall repair on all four door locks never been performed by the previous leasee, but there were three other outstanding recalls as well. So besides looking at VIN and collision info, you should check out recalls, too.
–Jonathan Goldman, Palm Springs, CA

A Nutty Nuance

While reading "Welcome to Snack Nation" (September 2015) the box of Honey Nut Cheerios caught my eye. I was surprised that your article did not mention the fact that

PHOTOGRAPH BY EVAN KAFKA



Honey Nut Cheerios contains no actual nuts, only something called "natural almond flavor." I guess Honey Almond Flavor Cheerios didn't sound too good to General Mills, either.
–Robert Pyles, Ely, NV

EDITOR'S NOTE Though it's true that Honey Nut Cheerios contains no nuts, the manufacturer, General Mills, recommends that people who are allergic to nuts skip that particular cereal.

Help With Health Insurance

In "Medical Bill Sticker Shock" (November 2015, page 50), you state that we should enroll in Medicare Part A before or after turning age 65 even if still covered by an employer's health plan. True perhaps for many but not for those enrolled in a Health Savings Plan (HSA) since a requirement for owning an HSA is to not be enrolled in Medicare. Thank you for a wonderful article.
–Jon Buzzell, Wichita, Kan.

EDITOR'S NOTE It's true that HSA owners may be better off waiting to sign up for Medicare Part A. It's also true that as the letter above (and others we received) demonstrates, making sense of health insurance can be maddeningly complex, and filled with nuances and exceptions. So we gathered some resources, our own and from other experts we trust, to help you navigate this crazy and frustrating but unavoidable world:

ConsumerReports.org/healthinsurance. How to pick your best plan and navigate the enrollment process.

ConsumersUnion.org/insurance-complaint-tool. Where to turn in your state if you're having a problem with a medical bill.

ConsumerReports.org/cro/medicare. From when and how to sign up, to what to look for in Medigap and Medicare Advantage plans.

GetCoveredAmerica.org. A nonprofit campaign under Enroll America that provides support to consumers in all 50 states by partnering with local agencies and consumer service organizations to provide information and guidance on the enrollment process and applying for financial assistance.

HealthCare.gov. Federally supported website that directs consumers to the health insurance marketplace in their state and provides enrollment deadlines and coverage options.

Medicare.gov. The government's official website for Medicare offers lots of useful, accessible information. Talk with a representative at 800-633-4227.

MedicareRights.org. A nonprofit organization that offers comprehensive advice and individual counseling. Or call 800-333-4114.

Shiptacenter.org. The State Health Insurance Assistance Programs, federally funded programs that help Medicare beneficiaries with plan choices, billing problems, and more.

WRITE

To share your comments for publication go to ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor

To reach us on social media see page 8.

CLARIFICATIONS

• On page 36 of "The Truth About Car Insurance" (September 2015), we incorrectly indicated loyalty penalties for customers of Geico Casualty in New Jersey and Washington state, as well as for Allstate Fire and Casualty and Allstate Property and Casualty. There were no penalties.

• On page 48 of "Medical Bill Sticker Shock" (November 2015), we reported that the Medicare Part D enrollment period runs from Nov. 1, 2015, to Jan. 31, 2016. The correct dates are Oct. 15, 2015, to Dec. 7, 2015.

• On page 50 of "Medical Bill Sticker Shock" (November 2015), we reported that Medicare Part D, the part of Medicare that covers prescription drugs, costs about $30 per month. Although certain plans may cost that much, you may be subject to an additional charge if your income is more than $85,000 for an individual or $170,000 for a married couple.

Holiday Helpers

At ConsumerReports.org

Access more great information online. You'll find:

Countdown to Black Friday Calendar

Our brand-new interactive calendar, starting November 1, will showcase a recommended gift-a-day for everyone on your list. Go to **ConsumerReports.org/countdown**



Holiday Shopping and Gift Guide

Find a rich array of money-saving deals and time-saving tips, plus expert advice on taking great holiday photos, carving a turkey, prepping your car for a holiday road trip, and much, much more. Go to **ConsumerReports.org/holidays**

Regularly Updated Ratings

As always, you'll find our buying guides and, for subscribers to our site, in-depth Ratings of products in this section and thousands more. Search for products on the **ConsumerReports.org** homepage.

AT CONSUMERREPORTS.ORG

Check out our new and improved site (ConsumerReports.org), which now has a dynamic modern look, improved search capabilities, high-quality videos, an exciting new car section, and the ability to share and comment on stories both from the magazine as well as news on the site. Subscribers to our website also have complete access to our buying guides and detailed Ratings of some 7,700 products that are regularly updated.



This month, with winter about to be upon most of us, see our: Ratings of 88 **SNOW BLOWERS** to help you dig out. **SNOW TIRES** Ratings of more than three dozen snow tires, for trucks, SUVs, and performance cars. **SPACE HEATERS** Sales are sizzling as homeowners and office workers try to get comfy. Our Ratings of almost 40 heaters will turn up the heat. **SNOW SHOVELS** Even people with a snow blower need to shovel sometimes, and our testers have lots of advice about which ones to get.

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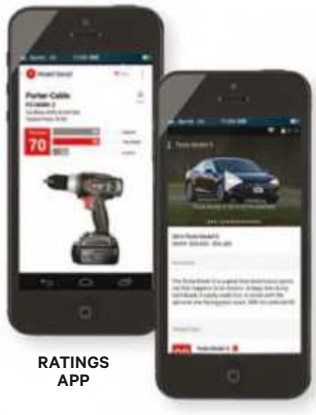


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You can also use your smartphone to check our buying guides and Ratings of more than 7,500 products at m.consumerreports.org.



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The UPDATE

FOOLED BY FOOD LABELS?

Confusion over expiration dates on food packaging is costing consumers billions of dollars every year. In fact, those dates have nothing to do with safety. See page 14.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



SMARTPHONES

Easy Ways to Boost Phone Storage

IF YOU HAVE HAD YOUR SMARTPHONE for a while, you may be getting messages that say "not enough storage" or "storage almost full." Phones can fill up fast with photos, videos, games and other apps, and song playlists, especially if you went for the 16GB "bargain" model iPhone or Android. Photos and videos shot with high-resolution cameras are the most notorious storage hogs. A single photo can eat up 5MB, and just 1 minute of a high-definition (HD) video may take up 500MB or even more.

But don't panic. You have great options without having to shell out for a larger-capacity phone.

Get a backup plan. Apple and Google have cloud-based servers to back up your files.

Apple's iCloud Drive, available to any device that can access an iTunes account, provides 5GB of free storage. To maximize it, go to Settings, then iCloud, then Photos. Flip the switch for iCloud Photo Library, then Optimize Photo Storage. That stores photos on your phone at a lower resolution while they're backed up on the cloud at full quality.

Google Drive, available for Android and iPhone, provides 15GB of free storage. All you need is a free Gmail account and the Google Drive app on your phone. Also consider downloading Google Photos, which lets you set up automatic photo and video backups, and provides a great interface for viewing, editing, and sharing photos.

Both services let you buy more storage (see table for prices). Tip: To conserve data usage, set the apps to perform backups only when your phone is connected to a Wi-Fi network you deem safe to use. To set that up on Google Photos, open Settings within the app. For iCloud Drive, open the app in Settings and switch off Use Cellular Data.

Add storage. Many Android phones have slots that accept microSD, a memory card that can expand storage up to 128GB. And the cards are cheap: about $25 for a microSD card with 64GB of storage. iPhones don't offer that feature.

Clean up your act. Once you have safely backed up your photos, videos, and other files, delete them from your phone to reclaim the storage space. Then open up a few more gigabytes by deleting apps and games you no longer use. Ditto for movies or music playlists you may have downloaded for some past road trip. Don't worry: Amazon, Apple, and Google keep copies of the apps and media content you bought from them, so you can download them again anytime. And of course the files you copied onto your phone from your computer, using iTunes or a similar program, are still on your computer. Music lovers may want to skip storing music on their phones altogether and instead stream it from such services as Pandora, Rdio, and Spotify—but remember to use Wi-Fi as often as possible.

SERVICE	FREE STORAGE	LOWEST PRICE	HIGHEST PRICE
Apple iCloud Drive	5GB	50GB at $1 per month	1 terabyte at $20 per month
Google Cloud	15GB	100GB at $2 per month	1 terabyte at $10 per month

FIRST LOOK

Game-Changing Printer May Save You Big Bucks

REPLACING PRICEY PRINTER INK CARTRIDGES over and over can cost you hundreds of dollars per year. It's enough to make you see magenta! In fact, according to a recent Consumer Reports survey, the two biggest gripes people have with printers are that ink cartridges are too expensive and that they need to be replaced too often.

But here's a potential breakthrough: A new type of printer, Epson's EcoTank line. The models have large, refillable ink tanks instead of tiny, disposable cartridges. Epson says the tanks will last a long time—and save you a lot of money.

The tanks contain enough ink to last about two years (based on a monthly print volume of 300 black-and-white and color pages), according to Epson. Once they're empty, you can buy replacement ink for $13 per tank or $52 for a set of all four colors—black, cyan, magenta, and yellow. Epson says those bottles should last for another two years. To get the same amount of ink in a traditional all-in-one inkjet, you'd need to buy 20 sets of cartridges, for a staggering total of $800.

The printers will cost you more up front than some others, though. Four consumer models are priced from $380 to $500, and a business version is priced at $1,200. (Its ink will cost more, too.) But for most consumers, a new EcoTank printer should more than pay for itself in two years.

We recently tried out a pre-retail model, the Epson Workforce ET-4550 EcoTank, $500. Stay tuned for our full test results. So far, our testers report that it's pretty easy to fill up the tanks, but it can be a bit messy. That means you may want to spend some of the money you'll save on a pair of disposable gloves.



Fill 'em up. Epson says its refillable ink tanks can save you more than $700 over two years.

LEARN

Online subscribers can find full printer Ratings at **ConsumerReports.org/printers**

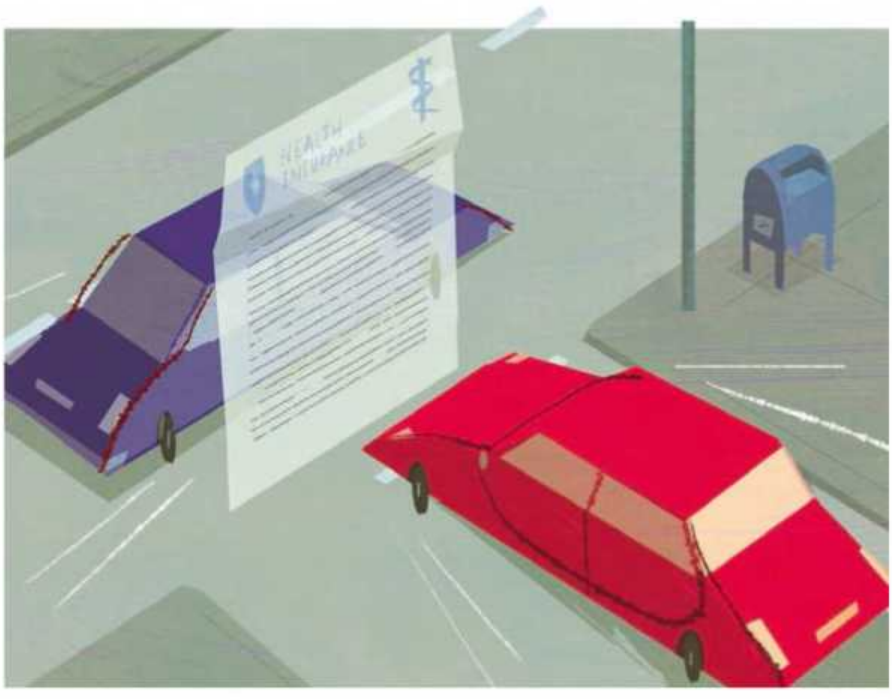
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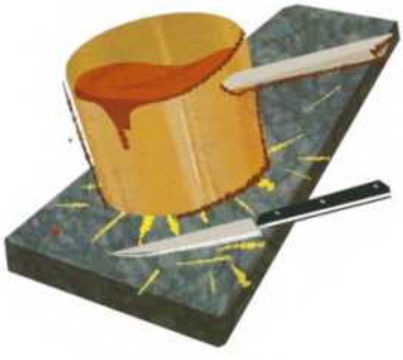
ASK OUR EXPERTS

If I have health and car insurance, won't that cover me and my passengers if I get hit by an uninsured driver?

Your health insurance will cover you, minus any deductibles, but it won't cover your passengers. Your auto-liability coverage will pay for any damage you cause, but it may not pay for your injuries or those of your passengers if the other driver was at fault.

You can't rely on your passengers having their own health insurance, either. That's why something called uninsured or underinsured motorist coverage (or UM/UIM, as it's known in the business) exists: to stand in place of the other guy's missing or insufficient liability coverage. It has no deductibles. About 13 percent of all drivers in the U.S. are uninsured, so we recommend that you buy UM/UIM coverage with the same limits as your own liability insurance.





You rate laminate countertops higher than granite for bathroom use but the reverse for kitchens. Why?

The kitchen environment is much tougher than the bathroom, generally speaking, which is why we test and rate countertops differently for each room. With kitchen countertops, for example, we look at how well surfaces resist damage caused by slicing and chopping. That isn't relevant for bathrooms, obviously. We use different staining agents, too: hair color and lipstick in the bathroom tests, and beet juice, grape juice, hot vegetable oil, mustard, and tomato sauce in the kitchen tests. Both granite and laminate have performed excellently in our heat tests, however, resisting any damage.

Since my knee-replacement surgery, my dentist has insisted that I take an antibiotic before she does any work on me. What's the risk if I don't?

Taking an antibiotic before dental work is necessary to help prevent infections in only a few types of patients, such as those with artificial heart valves and those with a previous history of bacterial endocarditis, a type of heart infection. That's because bacteria can enter the bloodstream through wounds in the mouth during a procedure and find their way to vulnerable organs or joints. In the past, there were broader recommendations that covered more people, including those with implanted knee and hip joints.

But now the American Dental Association doesn't recommend antibiotics before dental procedures for people who have had a joint replacement because it has found no association between the procedures and prosthetic joint infections. And Consumer Reports has long reported on the importance of stopping the widespread overuse of antibiotics. Not only can they cause diarrhea, stomach pain, and serious allergic reactions, but overuse can also increase a patient's risk of developing Clostridium difficile and breed antibiotic-resistant bacteria, a major public-health concern.



WRITE

We have more than 140 in-house experts who research, test, and compare—so you don't have to! Send your questions to: **ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts** and watch this space for the answers.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. RICHARD ALLEN

GET INVOLVED

Actions You Can Take in December

STOP MEDICAL STICKER SHOCK

Whether it's a sky-high charge for an emergency-room visit or a last-minute switch to an out-of-network anesthesiologist that triples your cost, Consumer Reports has long fought for protection against unfair medical bills. In our November issue, we reported that almost one-third of Americans had received a medical bill that wound up costing them more than they expected. Congress is now considering the End Surprise Billing Act of 2015, sponsored by Rep. Lloyd Doggett, a Democrat from Texas, which will require hospitals to get advanced consent if a patient's provider isn't in his or her insurance network. Go to EndSurpriseMedicalBills.org to learn more and to support the legislation. You'll also find a list of resources that can help you challenge inflated bills.



FIGHT FOR FDA FUNDING

The Food and Drug Administration recently released new rules that focus on preventing outbreaks of food poisoning. Rather than reacting to contaminations after they arise, the agency is now requiring food-processing facilities to identify and fix potential safety problems in their plants before they can trigger dangerous outbreaks. But the rules will work only if the agency has enough funding to fully implement them. (It doesn't.) Get involved by going to ConsumersUnion.org/fundfda and tell Congress it's time to give the FDA the money it needs to keep our food safe.

KEEP THE INTERNET OPEN

Back in February, the Federal Communications Commission approved new rules that give Americans unrestricted access to websites and online businesses—known as net neutrality. Why was that necessary? To stop Internet service providers from giving preferential treatment (and higher Internet speeds) to sites willing to pay extra fees. The cable and telecom industries pledged to fight the net-neutrality rules in court, and on Dec. 4 a federal appeals panel will hear their arguments. Consumer Reports has filed a legal brief in support of the FCC because we strongly believe that Web providers shouldn't be able to block or slow access to some websites while giving priority treatment to favored pages. By putting Internet start-ups and innovators on a level playing field with more established businesses, net neutrality fosters competition and could result in more choice for consumers. Learn more about how this debate has an impact on consumers and get the latest news about the legal challenge at HearUsNow.org.

RECALLS & UPDATES

VW DIESELS INVESTIGATION

Consumer Reports has removed its recommendations for two Volkswagen diesel cars—the Jetta and Passat—after the Environmental Protection Agency charged that VW had rigged its emissions test results. VW admitted it had fooled the EPA test for nitrogen oxides for the 2009-15 Jetta, 2009-14 Jetta SportWagen, 2012-15 Beetle and Beetle Convertible, 2010-15 Audi A3, 2010-15 Golf, 2015 Golf SportWagen, and 2012-15 Passat.



About 482,000 cars in the U.S. are affected and 11 million worldwide. On the road, the cars' nitrogen-oxide levels can hit up to 40 times the federal standard. The EPA expects to compel a recall to bring emissions into compliance, which could affect fuel economy and performance.

HALOGEN BULB HAZARD

Philips is recalling about 370,000 60W 120V halogen bulbs because the lens of the bulb can shatter in a lamp or if it falls, posing a risk of cuts or burns. The bulbs were sold



for about $10 at Home Depot, professional distributors, and Amazon.com from November 2013 through March 2015. Philips has received 13 reports of lenses shattering, including five incidents of property damage and two laceration injuries. Consumers should remove the bulbs from any fixtures and call Philips at 800-239-6587 or go to recall.philips.com to get free replacement bulbs.

ROTARY TOOL BURN WARNING

Robert Bosch Tool is recalling about 93,000 Dremel Micro Model 8050 rotary tools because the circuit board can overheat and melt the plastic enclosure. Call Robert Bosch Tool at 855-866-1291 or go to dremel.com for information about a free repair.



LEARN

Follow the latest developments in the Volkswagen cheating scandal and get expert insights from Consumer Reports' auto test team at ConsumerReports.org/cars

ILLUSTRATION: THEISPOT.COM

SCAM TRACKER



Could Your Alarm System Make You a Target for Thieves?

GOT A SIGN IN YOUR FRONT YARD warning would-be burglars that your house is protected by an electronic alarm system? It's there to keep you safe, but that sign may actually make you a target for a home-security scam.

In the latest twist, criminals are checking out yard signs, which often have the original installation date printed on the back. Then they strike by ringing doorbells and pretending to be from the company. Be on the lookout for these scammers:

Fraudulent 'technicians.' If someone claiming to be from your security company shows up and says that its computer noticed glitches in your system, watch out. His goal is to con you into letting him into your house to "fix" your alarm. Instead, he's going to tamper with it so that he can come back and steal from you.

Unscrupulous 'sales agents.' Those tricksters pretend that they need to "upgrade" your system. That's unlikely, because most reputable companies call to make an appointment before sending a representative. He actually wants to pressure you into signing a new monitoring contract–often with a different company–at inflated prices and with a five-year term or longer. People who sign those deals often find they can't get out of the contract without paying a penalty.

Phony 'system installers.' Their spiel is that your original installer has gone out of business. The imposter will tell you that his firm has taken over the contract and that you have to buy new equipment and sign a new contract–at a higher price and with a long-term lock-in.

Some con artists take a deposit for a new security system and are never heard from again. So don't be fooled into handing over cash to someone who shows up at your door. Remember, legitimate companies don't send a repairman unannounced. If your monitoring company has gone out of business, you will be notified by phone or mail.

Here are other ways to protect yourself:

- **Request references.** Ask any salesperson who appears at your door for names of neighbors that his company has serviced. Before you commit to any work, check with them to get their impression of the equipment and service.
- **Make sure contractors are legit.** Always ask for a license. Look for the number, the state where he's registered, and the name under which the license is filed. Also insist that all estimates for service and equipment be put in writing specifying the equipment, who will install it, how it will be maintained, and–of course–how much it will cost.
- **Read the fine print.** Make sure that everything you have agreed to is written into the contract. Read it closely for commitments you may have missed, such as monitoring fees and your right to cancel the deal.

If you have regrets, you're entitled to change your mind. The Federal Trade Commission's Cooling-Off Rule gives you three business days to cancel a deal if you sign a contract in your home or at a location that's not the seller's permanent place of business. And don't worry; you can change your mind even if the equipment has already been installed.

PACKAGING PLOYS

The Price of Premium Pasta

Pasta has a special place in many holiday meals. But does it pay to celebrate with a fancy brand? To find out, our experts compared regular pasta with a pricier new premium line.

THE TEST We pitted one of Barilla's Collezione Regional Specialties, Abruzzo-inspired Spaghetti Alla Chitarra, known for its distinctive square shape, against plain Barilla Thick Spaghetti. The former is pressed through a bronze die to create a coarse texture similar to homemade pasta, according to the company. Both products contain the exact same ingredients and are nutritionally identical.

The fancy pasta comes in an elegant dark-blue box emblazoned with gold lettering and a gold seal with a map of Italy, accompanied by the words, "Inspired by Abruzzo, Italy." At $2.33 per pound (the price we paid locally) vs. $1.49 for the regular version, you may think it came right off the boat. Nope; it's made in the U.S., though the company says its wheat blend and manufacturing equipment resemble those from its plant in Parma, Italy.

For our test, technicians cooked a half-pound of each pasta according to the manufacturer's directions, then served them twice in blind taste tests—sans sauce—to trained sensory panelists.

THE VERDICT Our experts found both products quite similar in taste and texture, and concluded that most people wouldn't notice a difference between them, especially with added sauce. The only real distinction between Spaghetti Alla Chitarra and Thick Spaghetti is the shape of the pasta—and the price. At 84 cents more per pound (and at some stores, we found a much greater price difference), the Alla Chitarra hardly warrants the premium.



PHOTO, TOP RIGHT: GETTY IMAGES; PHOTO, TOP LEFT: GETTY IMAGES

HEALTHY YOU

Is 'Expired' Food Safe to Eat?

Confusion over date labels leads us to toss groceries that are still good

FOR EVERY DOLLAR AMERICANS spend on food, they chuck about 10 cents' worth into the trash. That doesn't sound like much, but it adds up fast—to the tune of about $1,500 per year, on average, for a family of four, according to the Department of Agriculture. Not only is that a hit to your wallet; food waste also has far-reaching consequences. Food is the largest source of garbage in landfills, and it's a significant contributor to the production of methane, which is a cause of global warming. And then there are the water, electricity, fuel, and other resources wasted on growing and producing food that no one ever eats.

Picky kids, busy lifestyles, and poor planning are a few reasons so much of what we toss into our grocery carts winds up in garbage cans. But another major factor is a misconception about what all of those date labels on food packages—"sell by," "use by," "best by," and the like—really mean.

"Most consumers don't realize that they're really more about food quality than food safety," says Robert Gravani, Ph.D., a professor of food science at Cornell University. Food may not be at its peak after those dates, but such factors as staleness and color change are quality problems, not safety concerns. The truth is that in many cases, food on a shelf—or even in a fridge—past the date on the package is fine to eat and doesn't have to be thrown away.

"Foodborne illness comes from contamination, not from the natural process of decay," says Dana Gunders, a staff scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council and the author of the "Waste-Free Kitchen Handbook" (Chronicle Books, 2015). "And our senses are well-equipped to recognize decay." Foods past their prime may develop mold, become rancid, or spoil in other ways, but they are likely to look, smell, and taste bad before they actually become unsafe to eat.

There's no federal requirement that foods carry a date label except for infant formula, where the concern is nutritional quality, not safety. Several states have regulations, but the guidelines used to set the dates—and the meaning of terms—vary. The USDA offers these general definitions:

'SELL BY.' This is the date by which manufacturers suggest that retailers remove the product from shelves. The goal is to ensure quality for a period of time after you buy it. That can be several days to several weeks, depending on the item. For instance, milk, assuming proper refrigeration, should last five to seven days past its sell-by date before turning sour.

'BEST BY' AND 'USE BY.' Those terms tell you when to eat (or freeze) a product for the best quality. A jar of salsa may not taste as fresh and tangy as it's supposed to, for example, and crackers may be soft instead of crisp after those dates.

How are the dates determined? In most cases, manufacturers decide on dates and terms based on their own product testing. According to a report from the NRDC and Harvard University, they use a number of methods, such as lab tests and taste testing, to set them. And consumers have no way of knowing the background. In many cases, dates are conservative, and if you go beyond them, you may not notice any difference in quality, especially if the date has recently passed.

And in some cases, even items that have seen better days can still be used. "Use sour milk like buttermilk in pancake or biscuit batter," Gunders says. "You can revive wilted vegetables like carrots and celery by soaking them in ice water, and salad greens that are too limp to serve raw can be sautéed."



How to deal with dates. Take note of them—but not too literally.

PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

THE GREAT GIFT GUIDE

AT CONSUMER REPORTS, we buy and rigorously test thousands of products and services all year long so that you have an independent source by which to evaluate safety, performance, good value, energy efficiency, and environmental impact. At holiday time, that will make you a shrewder shopper, resulting in smarter, cooler, more delightful, and useful choices. We've reviewed a year's worth of testing to bring you the standouts from our labs—from TVs to toasters, smartphones to slow cookers, coffeemakers to cars. The results add up to our Best Products of 2015. Along the way, on the pages that follow, you'll also find expert advice on which rewards cards to use, whether recycled gift paper holds up, how to wrap a car, the secrets of a great gift basket, and more. Whether your goal is a thoughtful gesture or a supersized splash, you'll get the right steer here.

To find Ratings on these product categories in past issues, consult our full-year index on page 74 of this issue, and for regularly updated Ratings, subscribers to the site can go to ConsumerReports.org.

Gifts that stand out for sustainability.

Gifts that stand out as good values for the money.

WHAT YOU TOLD US Look for holiday insights throughout, from our national polls of more than 1,000 adults each.

For the Food Lover P. 16

For the Adventurous P. 28

For the Gadget Geek P. 32

For the Movers & Shakers P. 40

For the Pleasure-Seeker P. 48

For the Do-It-Yourselfer P. 54

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

FOR FULL RATINGS go to ConsumerReports.org



FOR THE FOOD LOVER

Help the budding chef on your holiday list with primo tools, big and small, from mixers to fridges.





In the Mix

Smeg 5-Quart SMF01RDUS $460

Smeg is best known for its retro-looking fridges, but the Italian manufacturer recently launched a line of equally mod small appliances, including a toaster, a blender, and an electric kettle. Adding noteworthy performance to the high design, Smeg's stand mixer snagged a spot on our winners' list, thanks to its prowess at mixing large batches of cookie dough and whipping cream into stiff peaks. Along with the pastel blue seen here, throwback hues include cream, fire engine red, and classic black.



Basket Case

Ronco Ready Grill RG1005BLGEN $80

This vertical broiler uses two sets of heating rods to quickly cook food in a basket from both sides, kind of like a toaster. It has no temperature control, just heating elements that are on the whole time and a 30-minute timer that turns off the grill when time is up. Chicken wings, frozen fries, and burgers were nicely browned and tasty but not smoky or grilled, and the Ready Grill cooked them faster than even a convection oven. Plus cleanup is a cinch.



Slice of the Good Life

Wolf Gourmet 4 Slice Toaster $400

Wolf, maker of high-end, restaurant-caliber ranges, is getting into the small-appliance game. Our testers were most impressed by the new four-slice toaster, which combines superb toasting with sleek, industrial design and Wolf's iconic red knobs. (Indeed, that snob, or should we say "knob," appeal helps explain the hefty price.) But the toaster also has all of the practical features we look for, including extra-wide slots, bagel and defrost settings, and a bread lifter for easy retrieval of toasted items.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



Counter Action

Kenmore Red 414302 $75

A food processor is all about food prep, but if it's going to stay out on the countertop, a bit of style doesn't hurt. This Kenmore delivers on both counts, with its sleek design, colorful accents, and capable chopping, slicing, and shredding. Throw in a very competitive price, and this model is a great way to balance your holiday gift budget— don't be surprised if the giftee thinks you spent a lot more.



Living Large

Breville Sous Chef BFP800XL/A $400

The food processor was invented in America by Cuisinart, but Australian manufacturer Breville is running away with the market. From chopping onions to slicing celery and shredding carrots, this top pick was aces in our tests, leaving the next best model in its dust. Its 16-cup container is great for large-batch slaws and stir-fries. We also like the variable slicing disk, enabling paper-thin veggies or thicker cuts, and the mini processing bowl is perfect for chopped nuts and herbs. The Breville isn't cheap, but it's a case where paying top dollar does get you top performance.



Tasty Settings

KitchenAid Multi-Cooker KMC4241 $350

Want to wish a very merry Christmas or happy Hanukkah to someone special who loves a good home-cooked meal? In our tests, this multitasking countertop appliance made caramelized onions, lentil soup, and kung pao chicken that were just as good as or better than when we prepared them on a rangetop. Programmed settings include sauté, sear, soup, risotto, yogurt, slow cook, and more. The optional five-mode stir tower, $250, mixes and stirs ingredients, preventing burning and sticking, and offering hands-free cooking. Capacity is only 4 quarts, though, and the stir tower can be a little noisy, especially at higher speeds.

PHOTO, TOP RIGHT: JAMES WORRELL; PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH

Spin Class

Vitamix Professional Series 750 blender $650

Vitamix is the biggest name in high-performance blenders—and the 750 series shows why. Combining speed, power, and precision, the versatile device can crank out perfectly blended smoothies and pulverize whole fruits into fiber-packed juices, and its fast-spinning blades can even make hot soup. Solid construction helped the 750 ace our tough durability test, and Vitamix stands behind it with a confident seven-year warranty. Another bonus: At 17.5 inches tall, the blender should fit under your kitchen cabinets, saving room on the countertop.



It's Personal

Ninja Nutri Ninja Pro $90

Personal blenders feature a smaller blending container that doubles as a travel cup—perfect if the giftee you have in mind likes to take his or her morning smoothie on the go. Ninja's version beat out the other half-dozen tested models by a wide margin, combining puréeing prowess with superior ice crushing. Like all personal blenders, the Ninja is best for low-impact tasks—say, making fresh fruit smoothies or mixing up a milk shake. Save the frozen cocktails for a full-sized blender.



Cost-Cutter

Ginsu Chikara $75

Ginsu knives have come a long way since the name became synonymous with cheesy 1970s-era infomercials. For less than $10 per knife, this eight-piece set offers great value, providing the cutting performance and handle comfort of knife sets costing three to four times as much. The set includes a chef and santoku knife, but you'll have to pay an additional $10 if you want a slicer.



MOST DISTASTEFUL GIFTS

FRUITCAKE IS BY FAR THE LEAST POPULAR HOLIDAY FOOD GIFT ITEM—31% PUT IT AT THE BOTTOM OF THEIR LIST. CANNED HAM TIED FOR THE SECOND WORST (WITH SUGAR-FREE CANDY), AT 13%.



Smooth Moves

10-Piece Calphalon Simply Nonstick $200

Keep the cook in your life happy with this snazzy set of high-performing cookware. With six pans and four lids, this nonstick set will get any new homeowner with culinary aspirations off to a good start. It's easy to clean, cooks evenly, and stands up to a lot of abuse. The star of the batch is the 10-inch omelet pan, which can also be gifted separately for $40.



Fire It Up

Weber Spirit SP-320 46700401 $600

It's never too early to splurge on your resident griller and give the gift of grilling joy. This midsized model has good looks, sturdy construction, and a 10-year burner warranty. With enough cooking space for up to 28 burgers, this three-burner grill is excellent at delivering low- and high-heat evenness in our tests. An electronic igniter fires it up reliably and simply, and four casters make it easy to move around the patio. It's also available in a natural-gas version.



Simmer From Afar

Crock-Pot Smart Slow Cooker With WeMo $130

Slow cookers have maintained their appeal in our too-busy-to-cook lives. This model boasts some better-than-basic features, including a roomy 6-quart capacity, cool-touch handles, and dishwasher-safe stoneware and glass lid. Plus you can connect to it through an app on your smartphone, so if you're stuck at your kid's ballgame and need to turn down the heat on the evening jambalaya before the chicken turns to mush, you can do that. Also, being able to monitor a heat-producing appliance while you're away from home offers peace of mind.







Cool Features

Samsung RF31FMESBSR
$3,300

SodaStream's sparkling water maker has become a holiday gift favorite. But for that really special someone, why not throw in a refrigerator as well? This four-door Samsung with a through-the-door ice and water dispenser has a SodaStream built right in. Novelty aside, the fridge delivered superb temperature control and efficiency in our tests, and its dual evaporative cooling should help extend the life of your food by maintaining optimal humidity levels.



Dual Treat

KitchenAid KDRS407VSS
$4,000

Have you and your spouse decided to forgo personal gifts and fix up the kitchen instead? This KitchenAid is the only 30-inch pro-style that made our top picks. It pairs a gas cooktop with an electric oven. Three of the four burners are high-power and deliver fast heat. Simmering is superb, and baking is impressive.



Magnetic Charm

Samsung NE58H9970WS $3,600

If your house needs a gift, splurge on this induction range that slides in between countertops for a built-in look. It's part of Samsung's stylish Chef Collection. Three of the four cooktop elements are high-power, delivering induction's fast heat and superb simmering and control with its magnetic energy. Virtual flames—LEDs that shine light onto pots—remind you that the elements are on. In our tests, the large oven proved to be impressive at baking and excellent at broiling. A slide-in partition converts the oven into two ovens with separate temperature controls, although they share one door. Convection and a warming drawer round out the features.



It Sizzles

Philips HD9230/26 Digital Airfryer $350

Here's one you might want to gift yourself with. Any fast-paced modern home should be outfitted with an air fryer like this one—it fries, bakes, and roasts using little or no oil. The Airfryer outcooked a convection oven in our labs, turning out crispy sweet potatoes and nicely browned fries. The manual suggests halving cooking times and reducing oven temperatures by 70° F for premade packaged foods, so you'll need to experiment, which is easy using the electronic controls. Cleaning can be a bit tricky, and the basket holds enough for just two hungry people.



Task Master

Panasonic Inverter NN-H965BF $180

This mighty microwave has one of the largest usable capacities of all of the models in our tests. And it earned our top ratings for two of the most important tasks—heating and defrosting. A sensor lets you know when food is perfectly cooked. It measures 14x24x20 inches and also comes in white.



High-Def Chef

Vizio E28h-C1 $200

This 28-inch set is sure to please the family cook. It's compact, has good high-definition picture quality, and—unlike other sets this size—comes with a smart TV platform: Vizio's Internet Apps Plus. That means you can quickly summon Alton Brown's eggnog recipe from the Food Network's online archives, enjoy your favorite holiday music via Pandora, or, better yet, stream "Babette's Feast" and steam broccoli at the same time.



Clean and Quiet

Bosch Ascenta SHX3AR7[5]UC $700

A longtime favorite from our tests, the Bosch Ascenta delivers top-notch washing for hundreds less than our other top picks. With a 95-minute cycle, it takes less time than the competition and is especially energy-efficient. A soil sensor monitors cleaning, and extras include hidden controls, delayed start, plenty of flatware slots, and an adjustable upper rack. One trade-off is the manual-clean filter, but that's what makes it run so quietly.

PHOTO, TOP RIGHT: NBC NEWSWIRE/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY IMAGES



Giving So It Counts

Before you write a check, make sure you do a charity checkup

AMERICANS TEND TO GIVE the most at the end of the year, not only to family and friends but also to charitable organizations. But it's also when scammers work their hardest to profit from that generosity.

This year there have been some truly devious scams by fake cancer charities. For example, organizations with names that sound reputable–such as the Cancer Fund of America and the Breast Cancer Society–were found to have cheated donors out of $187 million before federal and local enforcement agencies moved to shut them down.

And the recent refugee crisis in Europe led H. Art Taylor, president of the Better Business Bureau's Wise Giving Alliance, to warn consumers about spurious solicitations.

So before you donate, check out organizations you're considering with charity watchdogs, which make it easier to see where your dollars have the greatest impact. The three major ones are the Wise Giving Alliance (give.org), Charity Navigator (charitynavigator.org), and Charity Watch (charitywatch.org). They evaluate charities by looking at a number of factors, including how much of your donation actually reaches the causes you want to support.

To get the approval of the Wise Giving Alliance, for example, organizations must spend at least 65 percent of their donations on charitable program activities, and fundraising costs can't exceed 35 percent.

CharityWatch gives its top rating to about a third of the more than 600 charities it evaluates. Charity Navigator, which looks at more than 8,000 organizations, many of them small and regional, lets you see which charities rate high by metro area.

If you're thinking of making charitable donations in the name of family or friends this holiday season, it's probably a good idea to make sure that the causes you choose match their interests, says Elaine Swann, an etiquette and lifestyle expert in Los Angeles. If you're not sure, ask them in a way that allows them to graciously decline the offer.

HOW TO DETECT CHARITY SCAMS

It may not be easy to tell whether a caller asking for a donation is legitimate. But the Federal Trade Commission says these signs should make you suspicious:

- The "charity" can't provide details about how donations are used.
- The caller can't provide proof—like a Federal tax ID number—that it's a qualified charity and that your donation is tax-deductible.
- The caller pushes you to donate immediately.
- You're asked to wire a donation.
- The caller thanks you for a pledge you never made to convince you that you already agreed to donate.

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW HOLLISTER



That's a Wrap

Free gift wrapping is becoming harder to find, but it's still out there. Here's what 17 major retailers offer.

YOU KNOW THE SYNDROME: It's the night before your holiday event, and you're on your hands and knees on the floor. Your back is aching, tape is stuck to your slippers, you have paper cuts under your nails, and your puggle puppy has run off with the roll of wrapping paper—again. Regardless, Americans soldier on when it comes to wrapping gifts—spending about 3 hours during the holidays papering, boxing, and tagging gifts, according to Consumer Reports' polls. You can eliminate some of the work by having the pros do it, but most retailers charge for the service—if they offer it at all.

"Wrapping has become a profit center during the holidays," says retail expert Jack Abelson of Jack Abelson & Associates in Leawood, Kan. "It used to be done for free and was part of a combination of services we called value. But like so many other things, stores have gotten away from it."

To get a handle on what retailers are offering today, Consumer Reports contacted 17 major merchants to find out whether they offer gift wrap, and if so, what they provide in stores and online, and how much they charge. Here's what we learned. (Note: Unless otherwise stated, policies stand year-round. Also, for walk-in stores, prices may vary from location to location.)

AMAZON.COM

Online only Price depends on size and shape: $3.50 for items we tracked: a hardcover book, coffeemaker, and sweater. Most items come in a wrapped box or gift bag with ribbon and a card.

BARNES & NOBLE

Stores Price depends on store. One local merchant said wrapping is always free.
Online $4 per item for books and boxed products.

BED BATH & BEYOND

Stores Free do-it-yourself wrapping station with ribbons and other supplies.
Online $4 per order for eligible items. Large or boxed items come in a gift bag. Other goods come wrapped or in a gift box with tissue paper and ribbon.

BEST BUY

Stores $3 to $6 for gift bag, depending on size.
Online $5 for decorative box with tissue paper.

DILLARD'S

Stores $4 to $7 for a wrapped box with ribbon, depending on size.
Online $6 per gift box; no wrap.

JARED THE GALLERIA OF JEWELRY

Stores Free Jared box with wrapping paper and ribbon.
Online Free wrapped box, with option to add a personal message.

JCPENNEY

Stores Free box. Wrapping paper or a gift bag costs about $4.
Online $4 per item, which includes gift wrap, a bow, and a personalized message.

KOHL'S

Stores Boxes available free during the holidays.
Online $6 per box, which comes with color-coordinated wrapping paper and ribbon.

L.L.BEAN

Stores Free gift boxes.
Online $6 for a gift box with ribbon, tissue paper, and a card.

LORD & TAYLOR

Stores $6 for gift box and ribbon.
Online Same as at stores.

MACY'S

Stores Price depends on size, location, and other factors. At the flagship store in New York City, for example, options range from $6 to $16.
Online $6 for a gift box and ribbon.

NORDSTROM

Stores Free boxes, paper, and other supplies.
Online For $5, a gift box, bow, and gift card with a message; for $2, a gift box with tissue paper and a blank card; or a free eight- to 12-word message.

SEARS

Stores No.
Online $5 for wrap or gift bag, plus a message.

TARGET

Stores No.
Online $6 for eligible items.

VON MAUR

Stores Free.
Online Same as at stores.

WALMART

Stores No.
Online $4, but free for some items, including jewelry.

WILLIAMS-SONOMA

Stores Free box, paper, and ribbon.
Online $6 per box, includes wrapping paper and ribbon.

PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH. ICON: ROGER GOPAUL, NOUN PROJECT.

DOES 'GREEN' WRAPPING PAPER MAKE THE CUT?

The holidays are a time for giving, but they're also a period of tremendous waste. Think about all of the boxes, bows, and wrapping that get tossed into the garbage. The Environmental Protection Agency says that Americans generate more household trash—25 percent more, or about 25 million tons—than usual between Thanksgiving and the new year. But we can minimize the environmental toll by reducing, reusing, and recycling what we can. An easy place to start is with gift wrap.

To save a few trees this holiday season, try some new ways of dressing up your presents. For instance, instead of traditional paper, use a map for the adventurer on your list, or a section of the newspaper. (Try the dining section for your favorite foodie or the sports page for a superfan.) You can reuse traditional paper—as long as you unwrap gifts carefully and store the stuff neatly. Or you can buy green paper and other wrapping supplies made from recycled materials.

How does recycled gift wrap stand up? We tested and compared a few samples of recycled and virgin paper. We also looked at the various label claims so that you can sort out what you're really buying.

What Our Tests Found

In our labs, we tested three 100 percent recycled wraps (two from Earth Presents and one each from Earth Love'n Paper Products and Green Field Paper) against four virgin papers (two from American Greetings and one each from Hallmark and International Greetings). The recycled papers generally cost more; prices ranged from 15 cents per square foot for the cheapest virgin paper from American Greetings to 66 cents per square foot for the recycled Green Field paper.

We measured each sample's strength using an Instron, a device that slowly pushes a steel ball through the paper. Our technicians measured and recorded the force required to punch through the paper. We also noted how thick each sample was.

Not surprisingly, the thicker papers were the strongest—and the recycled papers were all thicker than the virgin products (including one labeled "heavy weight"). The biggest difference we found: The Earth Love'n wrap was three times as strong as one of the American Greetings papers, and it cost about three times as much.

The bottom line: Although the stronger, recycled papers are able to stand up to more abuse, all should withstand routine handling—if a wrapped box bounces around in the trunk of the car, for example.

What Those Labels Really Mean

No matter what wrap you buy, look for specifics on the labels of any recycled products, according to the Federal Trade Commission, which oversees labeling rules and polices the marketplace for misleading claims. How much of the product is made with recycled content? Look for the highest percentage of pre- and/or post-consumer recycled materials. (Post-consumer is the waste we toss into the trash; preconsumer is materials that have been recovered or diverted from the solid-waste stream during manufacturing.) Unless the product contains 100 percent recycled materials, the label should tell you what portion is recycled, the FTC says. Also note whether recycled claims concern the product, the package, or both. And don't confuse recycled with "recyclable," which just means that a product can be recycled, not that it contains recycled materials.

Be aware that the claims are not regulated. Though the FTC hasn't come down on any gift-wrap maker for misleading labeling, a commission spokesman says that companies are not required to provide the FTC with evidence unless it is requested during an investigation.

"While purchasing products that display an eco-label indicating '100 percent recycled materials' offers a greater degree of assurance than products with labels that simply indicate 'recycled material,' neither of these claims is verified by an independent third party," says Nicole Darnall, professor of management and public policy at Arizona State University's School of Public Affairs and School of Sustainability.

Holiday Helpers

At ConsumerReports.org

Access more great information online. You'll find:

Countdown to Black Friday Calendar

Our brand-new interactive calendar, starting November 1, will showcase a recommended gift-a-day for everyone on your list. Go to **ConsumerReports.org/countdown**

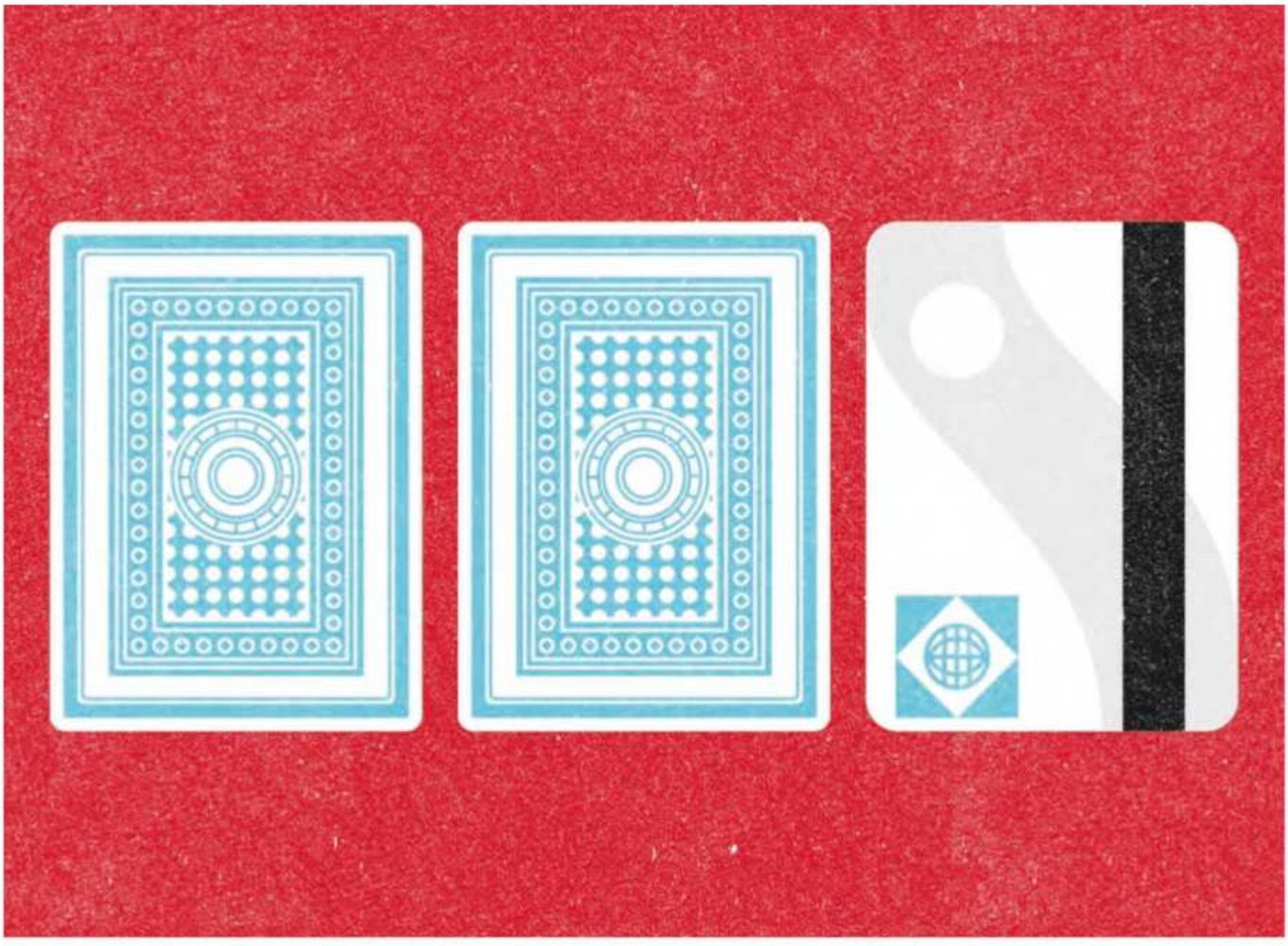


Holiday Shopping and Gift Guide

Find a rich array of money-saving deals and time-saving tips, plus expert advice on taking great holiday photos, carving a turkey, prepping your car for a holiday road trip, and much, much more. Go to **ConsumerReports.org/holidays**

Regularly Updated Ratings

As always, you'll find our buying guides and, for subscribers to our site, in-depth Ratings of products in this section and thousands more. Search for products on the **ConsumerReports.org** homepage.



Play Your Cards Right

Use the right credit card combo to maximize your rewards

ONE SMART WAY TO GET A DEAL on the things you buy this holiday season is to pay using rewards credit cards. If you choose the right ones, you can double the fun: Buy an iPad or two for your spouse and kids, shop for your turkey dinner, and pay for a flight to visit grandma, and you'll wind up giving yourself a gift, too. We found that if you charge your purchases on two cards instead of one, you could earn 10 to 40 percent more in rewards over time in the scenarios shown on the facing page.

Of course, to get the biggest savings you'll have to use the cards year-round—not just over the holidays. And you'll need to know the details about the reward programs, such as how much cash back they offer, whether there are caps on the amount you can earn, and what kinds of purchases qualify. One card, for example, may give you 3 percent cash back on gas, 6 percent on groceries, and 1 percent on everything else, and another may give you 2 percent back on all purchases.

To see how this strategy could benefit you, we used our proprietary credit card comparison calculator to review more than 90 rewards-card programs under six spending scenarios based in part on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and market research. We evaluated benefits over a three-year period because certain cards offer a generous sign-on bonus but more limited rewards in subsequent years. We also considered the actual value of the rewards—whether they come as miles, points, or cash back—and we assumed that cardholders don't carry balances. A few generous cards came up more than once because they work well for more than one kind of spender. Rewards programs can change at any time, so check them carefully online before you sign up.

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW HOLLISTER

THE FULL HOUSE

You belong to a typical American family. You have a spouse and two kids, and you spend about $300 on gas and $500 on groceries every month, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. On a credit card budget of $3,500 per month, you're also spending on clothes, drugstore goods, entertainment, travel, restaurant meals, and utilities.

YOUR CARDS

- **American Express Blue Cash Preferred Card**
- **Capital One Venture**

YOUR STRATEGY

Charge your monthly gas and grocery expenses to the American Express card to earn 6 percent cash back on groceries (on up to $6,000 over 12 months) and 3 percent cash back on gas. Use the Capital One card for everything else because it offers 2 miles for every dollar you spend in all categories.

REWARDS TOTAL

$3,550 over three years.

THE GLOBETROTTER

Whether it's for work or play, you spend lots of time on planes and in hotels, and you want to earn rewards so that your next trip is free. Seventy percent of your credit card spending is in travel-related categories such as airfare, hotels, rental cars, and restaurant meals, and you charge a total of $3,000 per month.

YOUR CARDS

- **Capital One Venture**
- **PenFed Premium Travel Rewards American Express Card**

YOUR STRATEGY

The PenFed card gives 5 points on every dollar spent on airfare but only 1 point on all other spending. So use it to buy your airline tickets, but charge other expenses to the Capital One card, which gives you 2 miles for every dollar you spend. It also gives new cardholders 40,000 bonus miles if they spend a total of $3,000 in the first three months. The PenFed card gives 20,000 miles if you spend $2,500 in three months. Neither card charges foreign transaction fees.

One caveat, though: To get the PenFed card, you have to first join the PenFed Credit Union. Anyone can join, and costs are low. Military personnel and their families can join free; others must make a one-time donation of $14 to Voices for America's Troops or $15 to the National Military Family Association. Members must keep at least $5 in a savings account.

REWARDS TOTAL

$3,400 over three years.

THE SMALL-BUSINESS OWNER

Your ongoing expenses include advertising, communications costs, gas, travel, and dinner with clients. You need cards that either give you cash back that you can reinvest in your business or provide travel points that you can use for future business trips. An analysis by Shoeboxed, which tracks small businesses' spending, found that owners' expenses average $2,245 per month. But that study was from three years ago, and business expenditures have been rising, according to the National Federation of Independent Business. So we estimate that you're charging $2,500 per month.

YOUR CARDS

- **PenFed Platinum Cash Rewards Visa Plus**
- **Capital One Spark Cash for Business** or **Capital One Spark Miles for Business**

YOUR STRATEGY

Use the PenFed card for gas because it offers 5 percent cash back. Charge everything else to the Capital One Spark Cash card, which gives you 2 percent cash back (plus a $500 cash bonus if you spend $4,500 in the first three months). To earn free travel perks instead, swap out the Spark Cash card for Spark Miles. You'll earn an equivalent of 2 miles per dollar spent. You'll also get the same sign-up bonus you can use for travel. Neither Capital One card charges a foreign transaction fee, and your rewards never expire.

REWARDS TOTAL

$2,500 over three years.

THE SAVVY SAVER

You're closing in on retirement and are at the height of your earning potential. Much of your income goes toward entertainment, groceries, and utilities, though you also spend money on clothing, drugstore goods, home improvements, gas, and restaurant meals. You charge about $4,200 per month.

YOUR CARDS

- **American Express Blue Cash Preferred Card**
- **Barclaycard Arrival Plus World Elite MasterCard**

YOUR STRATEGY

The American Express card gives you 6 percent cash back on groceries (on $6,000 annually) and 3 percent cash back at gas stations and certain department stores. But for other purchases, you'll get only 1 percent back. So charge everything else on the Barclaycard, which gives you 2 miles per dollar spent that can be redeemed as a statement credit for airline tickets, hotel stays, and cruises.

REWARDS TOTAL

$3,800 over three years.

THE STUDENT

You're in school, so money is tight, but you're still charging $250 per month or more on credit cards. Spending by those younger than 25, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, includes food, gas, travel, insurance, clothing, utilities, and entertainment.

YOUR CARDS

- **BankAmericard Cash Rewards Credit Card for Students**
- **Discover It Chrome for Students**

YOUR STRATEGY

Charge gas and groceries on BankAmericard. That'll give you 3 percent cash back per dollar spent on gas and 2 percent on groceries. (The amount drops to 1 percent after you spend a combined total of $1,500 per quarter in those categories.) If you have a Bank of America checking or savings account, you'll earn an additional 10 percent cash back on rewards you deposit into that account. Put the rest of your charges on the Discover card to earn 2 percent cash back on gas and restaurant meals (up to $1,000 in combined purchases each quarter) and 1 percent on the rest of your purchases.

REWARDS TOTAL

$235 over three years.

THE BIG SPENDER

You charge an average of $5,000 per month on your credit cards, so you could be a great contender for a premium card, according to research firm Mercator Advisory Group. In our calculations, we divided 75 percent of your spending among retail, entertainment, travel, and restaurant expenses. Groceries and gas make up a smaller part of your spending, so cards that richly reward you in those categories are not as important.

YOUR CARDS

- **Capital One Venture**
- **Citi ThankYou Premier**

YOUR STRATEGY

Charge your entertainment, restaurant, and travel expenses to the Citi card. That way you'll earn 3 points for each travel dollar spent and 2 points for entertainment and restaurants. Your points are worth 25 percent more when redeemed for airfare, hotels, cruises, and car rentals through Citi's ThankYou Travel Center. Put all other expenses on the Capital One card to earn 2 miles for every dollar you spend. If you charge $3,000 on the Capital One card during the first 90 days after you activate it, you'll get 40,000 bonus miles. You'll get 50,000 bonus points from Citi after charging $3,000 during the first 90 days.

REWARDS TOTAL

$4,650 over three years.

FOR THE

ADVENTUROUS

**Not all great gifts come in a box.
Give someone a once-in-a-lifetime experience
or a daily dose of goodies.**



PHOTO: GARY JOHN NORMAN/GETTY IMAGES

THEY'RE THE PEOPLE on your gift list who are tough to buy for, the ones who have everything that money can buy or live in tiny apartments with little storage space. Why not give them an adventure instead, like hang-gliding lessons? Or buy the services of an errand runner or a chef to cook dinner, or keep their heart pumping with a regular shipment of coffee.

Whatever you give, be sure to think about what each recipient would really like. Remember Marie Barone in the TV show "Everybody Loves Raymond" begging her son not to send her anything else from the Fruit of the Month Club?

No matter what their tastes may be, your friends and relatives may find that unexpected experiences and treats just may be the "It" gifts this holiday season.

GIVE A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE

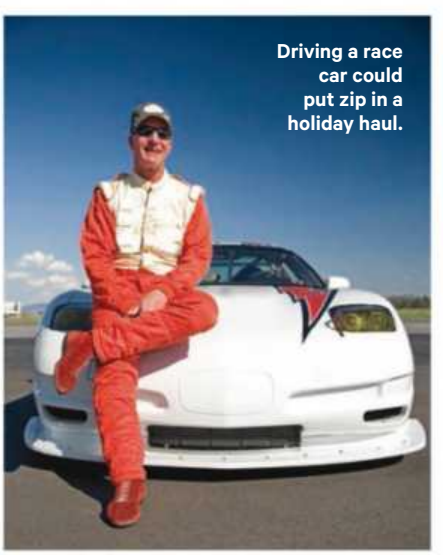
Cloud 9 Living

cloud9living.com

Excitations

excitations.com

Release the inner James Bond: Send your husband or wife around a track in a Lamborghini ($300) or up in a biplane ($115). Give your golfer a lesson with a PGA pro ($300) or your kayaker a day paddling on a river ($65). Through websites like Cloud 9 Living and Excitations, you can search throughout the U.S. for gifts for a range of people and pocketbooks, with opportunities that offer relaxation as well as exhilaration and just plain fun. From a wine and painting class ($45) to meeting a penguin one-on-one ($135), there's something for everyone. You can also let your giftees choose their own experience by giving them a gift card. Cloud 9 Living's website says its database has more than 2,000 options in 51 cities. Excitations says it offers experiences in 17 cities. For more information, call 866-525-6839 (Cloud 9) and 877-839-2483 (Excitations).



Driving a race car could put zip in a holiday haul.

EASE THE GRIND

Intelligentsia Coffee

intelligentsiacoffee.com

Pick the beans or type of grind, and someone special can be on the receiving end of regular coffee deliveries. The website also lets you specify how much and how often the coffee is delivered. Let your recipient know up front the duration of the gift, and contact the company when you want to end deliveries. After six months of a subscription, Intelligentsia will mail a coffee mug; after ordering at least two 12-ounce bags of coffee, you'll get 50 percent off future shipping charges. To ship a 12-ounce bag of House Blend beans once per month costs $14, plus shipping and tax. Gift cards are also available. For more information, call 888-945-9786.

Starbucks

starbucks.com

Starbucks has a subscription plan that lets you give one 8.8-ounce bag ($19) of Starbucks Reserve coffee for delivery for three ($57), six ($114) or 12 ($228) months, or ongoing. The shipping cost is included, but not tax. The coffee seller also has a "Build Your Own" subscription plan, where you choose the type of coffee, the number of bags to send, and how often. For example, the House Blend, available via that subscription, is $11.95 per 1-pound bag, plus tax and shipping. Starbucks also has gift cards. For more information, call 877-421-9062.



With a coffee subscription, friends can remember you all year long.

Stumptown Coffee Roasters

stumptowncoffee.com

Stumptown is a nickname for Portland, Ore., where the coffee company is based. On the Stumptown Coffee Roasters' site, pick the variety of coffee you want to send, the bag size (8 or 12 ounces), how many bags you want mailed, and for how long (every two weeks for three, six, or 12 months). For example, a 12-ounce bag of House Blend costs $20 per shipment every two weeks. Send one for three months (the shortest subscription length), and the cost is $120; six months is $240; a year is $480. Prices include shipping but not tax. Gift cards are also available. For more information, call 855-711-3385.



A tasty gift: Send a guest chef to cook for a dinner party.

CHEF FOR A DAY

Hire a Chef

hireachef.com

If you want to splurge on a gift that involves food, send a professional chef to create a special meal in the kitchen of a friend or family member—cleanup included! You can find one through the website of the United States Personal Chef Association. They're vetted USPCA members; search by town or ZIP code. There are almost 1,000 chefs in the database and many cuisine options. We found a chef in Providence, R.I., for example, who will cook for a party of three to 20 people for $75 per person, plus the cost of groceries. A romantic dinner for two is $200, plus shopping costs. For more information, call 800-995-2138.

BOTTLE SERVICE

Wine of the Month Club

wineofthemonthclub.com

In 1972, this club originated the concept of mailing wine directly to customers. Subscription plans include the Classic Series ($37 per month) with wine from all over the world; the California Series ($43 per month), featuring wine from the Golden State; and the Limited Series ($58 per month), which is described as offering hard-to-find "boutique" wines. (There are many subscription gift plans, so check the website.) The plans send two bottles of wine per month.

Knowing your giftee's Bacchus bent is helpful when the option is for one red and one white, both white, or both red. Preferences can always be changed. (With the California Series, you can only send red.) Select a subscription of four months, six months, or one year. You determine the frequency of the shipments; there are monthly, quarterly, or every-other-month options.

Each shipment comes with a newsletter that includes information about the winemaker and winery, recipes, serving suggestions, and wine anecdotes and information. If your giftee doesn't like the wine, the club will send a new bottle free. Shipping fees are included, but taxes are extra and depend on the state. (Check to make sure the club delivers to your giftee's state.) Gift certificates are available. For more information, call 800-949-9463.

New York Times Wine Club

nytwineclub.com

With the Times Sampler Wine Club, you can send six bottles at a time from various wine regions around the world. Tasting notes and New York Times recipes come with the wine. Of the six bottles per shipment, you can select two whites and four reds, or all reds. Orders can be delivered every month or every two or three months, and you can keep the gift going indefinitely or define the number of shipments (four, eight, or 12). The cost is $90 per shipment.

The Times also has a more expensive subscription option called the Times Reserve Wine Club, which sends six "age worthy" bottles at a time. As with the Sampler Wine Club, you can specify two whites and four reds, or all reds. The cost is $180 per shipment.

If you're feeling generous, gift a year of wine. For $360, send six bottles four times per year (24 bottles total).

The New York Times Wine Club also has nonsubscription gift options that pair wine and books. For $69.99, you can give two bottles of wine with "Wine with Food" by the wine critic Eric Asimov and the food writer Florence Fabricant. If you're still puzzling over a gift, for the same price you can send three bottles of wine with "The New York Times ABC's of Crosswords," edited by the paper's crossword puzzle editor, Will Shortz. E-gift cards are also available. For more information, call 877-698-6841.



A bottle of red, a bottle of white—sending vino will delight.



LOCAL BOUNTY

Local Harvest

localharvest.org/csa

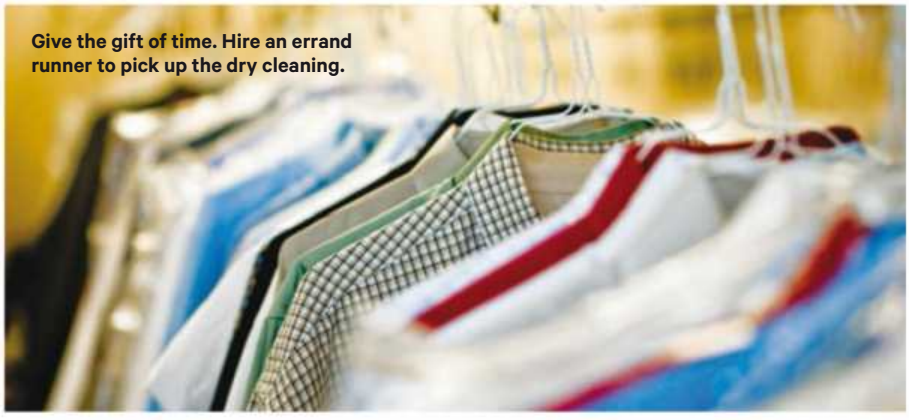
Department of Agriculture CSA

http://search.ams.usda.gov/CSA/

Turnips and kale and tomatoes—oh, my! Give a farmstand to a friend. Through CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), you can support local farmers by sending fresh vegetables, fruit, and other farm fare—including organic products certified by the Department of Agriculture. Some CSA programs operate year-round and many offer additional items like eggs, cheese, meat, baked bread, and flowers. Search the Local Harvest website to find one in your giftee's area. (The site claims more than 4,000 nationwide in its database.) Select "Shop" from the top menu, then the "CSA Subscriptions" category. You can search by ZIP code and sort the results by price or distance. Check to see whether the CSA you're considering will deliver to your door or to a pickup site. If your giftee lives near the farm, she may be able to fill the CSA box there.

Through the Local Harvest site, we found a farm in Michigan that sells various gift certificates, including one for $140 for four weeks of a full share of produce delivered (good for a family of four). A Tennessee farm sells a 10-week share of veggies (good for a couple or a small family) for $210 for pickup. For egg lovers, a Wisconsin farm sells a dozen eggs per week for 20 weeks for $160. For more information, call Local Harvest at 831-515-5602.

Through the USDA site we found a North Carolina farm selling certified organic produce (for pickup) for a full share at $325 for 12 weeks. That CSA, like many others, also offers recipes, including chocolate-beet brownies, and tips ("Turnips 101 for Yankees"). Hey, don't knock it till you try it!



Give the gift of time. Hire an errand runner to pick up the dry cleaning.

BUYING TIME

ICLM

iclmdirectory.com

Gift an extra set of hands to pick up the dry cleaning, do the grocery shopping, or run to the post office or library. "Every single one of us tries to squeeze 36 hours into a 24-hour day," says Katharine Giovanni, a concierge training expert and founder of the International Concierge and Lifestyle Management Association. The ICLM directory has listings for concierge services in more than 45 U.S. locations and some international cities. Members agree to a code of ethics. To search, select a city from the website's drop-down menu. For example, we found an errand service in Texas that offers gift certificates and charges $25 for the first half hour, $11.25 for each additional 15 minutes. For more information on ICLM, call 919-443-2425.

TaskRabbit

taskrabbit.com

This website and app helps connect the harried with a vetted "tasker." It operates in 18 U.S. cities and in London. The company says it runs identity and criminal-record checks on the taskers. There are profiles that include their hourly rate, reviews, the percentage of reviews that are positive, and the number of tasks they have completed. We searched the site for someone to grocery shop in Atlanta, and the hourly rates ranged from $20 to $45. Create an account on the site to get a PDF-file gift card that you can email or print and send by snail mail to your giftee. For more information, call 844-340-8275.

FLOWER POWER



FTD

ftd.com

Bestow a bouquet with FTD's Monthly Flower Gift plan for three months, six months, or a year. The flowers are sent the third week of each month. Giving three months of flowers costs $149.99; six months is $299.99, and 12 months is $599.99. Sign up for the Gold Membership plan for $39.99 per year to waive shipping and other fees, but you still pay taxes, depending on the delivery location. For more information, call 800-736-3383.

1-800-Flowers

1800flowers.com

Gift ye rosebuds while ye may with the 1-800-Flowers Rose of the Month Club. Delivery options are one bouquet of roses per month for three, six, or 12 months. The cost is $39.99 per month. With the $29.99 per year Celebrations Passport membership, you waive shipping and fees, but not taxes. For more information, call 800-356-9377.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

FOR THE

GADGET GEEK

The latest electronics can bring joy to people's lives, whether through reading, connecting, or staying fit.



Once Upon a Time

Kindle Paperwhite $120

With its velvety case, sharp contrast, and super-crisp text, the Paperwhite is a welcome treat for anyone who takes pleasure in reading. The new typeface was designed for bookworms (hence the name Bookerly), and the character spacing and kerning engine has been upgraded, Amazon says. Spouses will love this gift, too, because the adjustable front light won't disturb their slumber.



Command Central

LG G4 $480

The 2015 model earns kudos for its excellent 5.5-inch, quad-HD display and a very good 15.9-megapixel camera that allows a user to take still photos while shooting video. Other useful features on the Android 5.1 device include a removable battery, a memory card slot, a built-in infrared blaster to control TVs and cable boxes, and the ability to split its screen between two running apps.



Pace Setter

Fitbit Surge $250



What makes this fitness tracker so appealing? In addition to monitoring your heart rate and steps, it has a built-in GPS to track your pace, distance, and speed. Much like a smartwatch, it also notifies you about text messages and phone calls, which lets you keep your phone in a purse or backpack when you race off to do errands.

One Direction

Garmin nuvi 3597LMTHD [GPS] $330

You won't find a better co-pilot. This Garmin tops our ratings for excellence in routing options, guidance, and ease of use. Up-to-the-minute traffic updates and historical data will help the family chauffeur avoid bottlenecks. The high-resolution 5-inch glass display lets him "pinch and zoom" for a closer look at the map. And the Bluetooth hands-free calling option pairs the device with a smartphone so that he can proudly announce the family's imminent arrival on grandma's doorstep.



Solid State

Apple MacBook MF855LL/A $1,200

Extremely thin and lightweight, this 12-inch laptop features a new pressure-sensitive trackpad that lets you preview info and issue commands with the force of your touch. Outfitted with a Core M processor and a 256-gigabyte solid-state drive, it also earns props for its 16.25-hour battery life, an excellent 2304x1440 display, and very good performance and ergonomics.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Building Skills

Kano Computer Kit $150

For 6- to 10-year-olds fascinated by how things work—and DIY-happy dads and moms—the Kano Computer Kit is a great way to learn the basics of computer science. Powered by a Raspberry Pi 2 processor, it takes roughly 20 minutes to assemble and includes Wi-Fi and a touchpad-enabled keyboard. The open-source operating system invites safe exploration in a contained environment.





Floor Fighter

iClebo Arte YCR-MO5 $450

Giving someone a vacuum for the holidays says "please clean the floors." Giving someone a robot vacuum for the holidays says "please relax while the floors clean themselves." In our tests, the iClebo Arte produced impressive results, especially on bare floors. It tends to move its charging base around while cleaning and it can wobble a bit when it goes from bare floors to carpets, but it was also quiet, simple to program, and easy to clean.

Character Actors

Toys-to-Life Games

In 2011, Activision merged the notion of toy and video game in a product called Skylanders, which lets kids take a figurine, place it on a portal linked to a gaming console, and watch that character spring to life on screen. It didn't take long for others to spot a hit: The new Skylanders SuperChargers now competes with Disney Infinity 3.0 and Lego Dimensions.

For the uninitiated, here's how the systems work: First you buy the game, which comes with a few characters, for your console of choice (PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Wii, Wii U, Xbox 360, or Xbox One). Then, as your child plays, he or she encounters parts of the game unlocked by or tailored to a specific character or accessory. And, of course, those characters and accessories cost extra. For kids, it extends the gameplay. For adults, it expands the potential spend. Here's how it all adds up.





	Skylanders SuperChargers	Disney Infinity 3.0	Lego Dimensions
Cost for Game Starter Pack	$75	$60	$100
Cost of Each Additional Character/ Accessory Pack	$13-$35	$10-$35	$15-$30
Total Number of Playable Characters	More Than 300	87	25





Perfect Touch

Apple iPhone 6s
From $650

It may look just like the iPhone 6, but this model has an enticing edge over its sales-record predecessor. The sensitive 3D Touch display lets users preview messages, peek at attachments without opening them, and take instant selfies without having to launch the photo app. In short, it makes the pointer finger more powerful than ever. As an added bonus, it ranks with the 6s Plus among the first iPhones to take 4K video.



Probe It

Oregon Scientific Wireless BBQ/Oven AW131 $40

This holiday, let your meat monitor itself while you enjoy your guests. The probe of this digital thermometer remains in the roast while it cooks, constantly reading the temperature while the oven door stays closed. When the desired doneness is reached, the wireless receiver beeps two times and says, "It's done." Transmission range is about 160 feet. Well-done, wouldn't you say?

Fast and Light

Samsung Ativ Book 9 NP930X2K-K01US $1,100

Ultrathin, lightweight, and quiet, this 12-inch laptop is an excellent performer for an on-the-go student or professional. The Intel Core M-5Y31 processor, solid-state drive, and Windows 10 operating system make it one of the fastest models we've tested. And the hearty 9½-hour battery life grants your giftee a solid day's worth of emails, Web browsing, music, and video editing.





Photo Finish

Epson Expression Premium XP-620 $100

If you know someone who likes printing photos without spending a lot on ink, this wireless all-in-one printer should fit the bill. It produces excellent quality photos, very good color graphics, and good text. It even has a separate tray for printing snapshot-sized (4x6) photos. It also provides an auto-duplexing feature so that you can print on both sides of the paper.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Batteries Built to Last

Put these at the top of your holiday shopping list



NOTHING KILLS the joy of a holiday morning like forgetting the batteries. So if you don't want to run to the store in your pajamas, plan ahead and buy the best batteries to power those train sets and talking dolls.

We recently tested and rated 15 AA batteries for performance and price—13 alkalines and two lithiums (no rechargeables). Prices ranged from just 62 cents per pair to almost $5 per pair. To simulate toy use, we put each battery to work for one full hour per day until it died. To test how well the batteries work in a flashlight, we ran each model for 4 minutes per hour for 8 straight hours, let it sit for 16 hours, then repeated the pattern.

What we found: The Duracell Quantum alkaline—priced in the middle of the pack at $2.48 per pair—did as well as the Energizer Ultimate lithium that cost almost twice as much. And the Rayovac Fusion Advanced alkaline ($2) surpassed the highest-priced battery we tried, the Energizer Advanced lithium ($4.96).

Does that mean you should avoid lithium batteries? No, they still rate higher than most of the alkalines we put to the test.

It's always smart to stock up on batteries when they go on sale, especially when you find a good price on larger-sized packages, which are usually a better value anyway. And here's a sweet deal for Costco members: High-scoring Kirkland Signature alkalines, sold only in packs of 48 or 72, come out to about $1 per pair.

For the Best Results

- **Don't mix and match.** To avoid leaks and ruptures, always use batteries of the same age, brand, and type to power your devices.
- **Clean the contact surfaces and battery compartment.** Use a fresh pencil eraser or rough cloth to do that each time you install new batteries.
- **Don't keep batteries in your pocket.** Exposure to metals—say, loose nickels and dimes—can short-circuit them.
- **Store them in a cool, dry place—ideally in the original packaging.** That will protect them from heat, moisture, and short-circuiting. Notice we didn't say anything about storing them in a refrigerator. Despite what you may have heard, batteries don't like the cold.
- **Don't try to recharge them.** Unless they're rechargeable, of course. Regular batteries can explode. Abusing them is a bad idea, too. So put down that sledgehammer!
- **Give them a break.** Before you store those singing, blinking holiday decorations, remove the batteries. Better to replace a few AAs a year from now than to lose a family treasure because of leakage.

Ratings: AAs to Power Toys for Kids and Grown-Ups

☑ CR Best Buy ☑ Recommended

Better ◀ ● ◓ ○ ◒ ● ▶ Worse

Rec.	Rank	PRODUCT	PRICE [1]	SCORE	TEST RESULTS: Toy	TEST RESULTS: Flashlight
A.		**LITHIUM BATTERIES**				
☑	1	**Energizer** Ultimate Lithium AA	$4.90	89	●	●
☑	2	**Energizer** Advanced Lithium AA	$4.96	82	◓	●
B.		**ALKALINE BATTERIES**				
☑	1	**Duracell** Quantum AA Alkaline	$2.48	89	●	●
☑	2	**Rayovac** Fusion Advanced AA Alkaline	$2	85	●	●
☑	3	**CVS** MAX AA Alkaline	$1.84	82	●	●
☑	4	**Duracell** Coppertop Duralock AA Alkaline	$2.50	80	●	◓
☑	5	**Kirkland** Signature (Costco) AA Alkaline	$1	80	◓	◓
☑	6	**Rite Aid** Home AA Alkaline	$2.40	79	◓	◓
☑	7	**AmazonBasics** Performance AA Alkaline	$1.50	71	◓	◓
☑	8	**Walgreens** W Alkaline Supercell AA	$1.80	71	◓	◓
	9	**Energizer** EcoAdvanced AA Alkaline	$3.50	68	◓	◓
	10	**Energizer** MAX +PowerSeal AA Alkaline	$3.48	67	◓	◓
	11	**CVS** AA Alkaline	$2.14	62	◓	○
	12	**Dynex** (Best Buy) High-Capacity AA Alkaline	$0.62	60	○	○
	13	**EcoAlkalines** AA Alkaline	$1.50	59	○	◓

[1] Per pair.

PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

Tops for Tech Shopping

IF YOUR HOLIDAY shopping list includes a laptop, TV, or other electronics product, you may want to reach for your keyboard, not your car keys. According to a recent survey of more than 40,000 Consumer Reports subscribers, consumers who bought electronics items online were more satisfied overall than those who shopped at walk-in stores. In fact, they were happier in almost every service category, though walk-in stores—still popular for hands-on experience—prevailed for installation, and disposal and recycling services.

WHICH STORE TYPE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?
If you value low price over choice or helpful sales staff, try warehouse clubs BJ's, Costco, and Sam's Club—just make sure you save enough on your purchases to offset the $50 annual membership fee. For great online deals, go to Abt.com or—if you're eligible—Shopmyexchange.com (the Army & Air Force Exchange website) or Navy Exchange. Don't be afraid to ask for a lower price. Only 14 percent of the walk-in shoppers surveyed did so, but well over half were successful, saving an average of $76. Feeling shy? Online retailers, which often offer aggressive pricing, have digital tools for comparison shopping.

If you need hand-holding, support your local, independent retailer. Shops like those rate high for customer service, which helps counter the less favorable pricing. Abt Electronics and Appliances, a Chicago-area walk-in retailer, stood out for service. Others include Amazon.com, which accounted for most online sales among the survey respondents; Apple; BHPhotoVideo.com; Bose.com; Crutchfield.com; and QVC.com.

If you want a wide array of choices, don't expect to find it at an Office Depot, a RadioShack, a Target, or a Walmart. For a broad selection, you're better off browsing online.

Ratings: Electronics Retailers

Better ◀ ▶ Worse

RETAILER	READER SCORE	SURVEY RESULTS					
	0 100	Product Quality	Customer Service	Price	Selection	Buying Ease	Checkout Ease
ONLINE							
Abt.com	97	●	–	●	●	●	●
BHPhotoVideo.com	96	●	●	◓	●	●	●
Crutchfield.com	94	●	●	◓	◓	●	●
Amazon.com	94	◓	●	◓	◓	●	●
Bose.com	94	●	●	○	○	◓	◓
Costco.com	93	◓	◓	●	●	◓	●
Apple.com	93	●	●	◒	◓	●	●
Adorama.com	92	●	◓	◓	●	◓	●
Shopmyexchange.com	92	●	○	●	○	○	●
Target.com	92	◓	◓	◓	○	○	◓
QVC.com	91	◓	●	◓	○	●	●
Newegg.com	90	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓	◓
SamsClub.com	90	◓	○	◓	◒	○	◓
Staples.com	90	◓	◓	◓	○	◓	◓
Sony.com	89	◓	○	○	○	◓	◓
BestBuy.com	88	◓	○	◓	◓	○	◓
TigerDirect.com	88	○	○	◓	◓	◓	◓
Independent Websites	88	◓	○	◓	○	◓	◓
Walmart.com	87	◓	○	◓	○	○	○
HSN.com	87	◓	◓	○	○	◓	●
HP.com	86	○	○	○	○	○	◓
Dell.com	85	○	○	○	○	○	○
WALK-IN RETAILER							
Abt Electronics and Appliances	95	●	●	◓	●	●	●
Nebraska Furniture Mart	93	●	◓	◓	●	●	◓
Apple	92	●	●	◒	◓	◓	●
Independent Retailers	92	●	●	○	○	◓	●
Costco Wholesale	92	◓	○	◓	●	○	○
Navy Exchange	92	●	○	●	○	○	◓
Bose	91	●	◓	◒	○	●	◓
Army & Air Force Exchange (the Exchange)	90	●	○	◓	◒	○	◓
Video Only	90	◓	◓	○	◓	◓	◓
GameStop	89	◓	◓	◒	○	○	○
Fred Meyer Stores	89	○	○	○	◒	○	◓
Barnes & Noble	89	◓	◓	○	◒	◓	◓
BJ's Wholesale Club	88	◓	●	◓	●	○	○
Sam's Club	87	◓	◒	◓	◒	○	○
Micro Center	87	◓	◓	◓	◓	◒	○
P.C. Richard & Son	87	◓	○	○	◓	●	◓
Target	86	◓	◒	○	●	◒	○
Staples	85	○	○	○	◒	◒	○
HHGregg	85	◓	○	○	○	○	○
Best Buy	85	◓	○	○	○	○	○
Sears	84	◓	○	○	◒	○	○
RadioShack	84	○	○	○	●	●	◓
Office Depot	82	○	○	○	●	●	○
Fry's Electronics	81	○	◒	○	○	●	◒
Walmart	80	○	●	○	●	●	●

Guide to the Ratings. Scores are based on 62,738 purchases of camcorders, cameras, desktop computers, DVD or Blu-ray players, e-book readers, GPS, laptops, MP3 players, tablets, TVs, video game consoles, sound bars, wireless speakers, activity trackers, and smartwatches by 40,700 Consumer Reports subscribers between January 2014 and June 2015. Results might not reflect the U.S. population. **Reader Score** reflects overall satisfaction with the shopping experience. A score of 100 would mean all respondents are completely satisfied; 80, that respondents are very satisfied, on average. Differences of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. Each rating category under Survey Results reflects average scores on a scale from "very poor" to "excellent." Scores for **Customer Service** and **Buying Ease** are not directly comparable between walk-in and online retailers. **Customer Service** pertains to online or phone support for websites and in-store sales help for walk-in stores. **Online Buying Ease** reflects using the website; **In-Store Buying Ease** reflects fewer problems such as sale items being unavailable, long checkout lines, and crowded displays.

Best of the Baskets

Our survey revealed what Americans really want in a gift basket, then we searched to find offerings that really delivered

THE GIFT BASKET has earned a reputation as a holiday gift you give when you've run out of ideas. And that's unfortunate because gift baskets can be a pleasure to receive, even if not every last item hits the spot.

Not that ordering one will be a snap. Many vendors offer dozens of baskets, boxes, and towers. What do people really want? And which assortments offer the best quality? We wanted to know, so we did what any reasonable organization with its own in-house survey department and expert sensory testers would do. We asked, then we tested.

Specifically, we recently conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,024 adults to ask what they would most like to find in a gift basket. The winner by a long shot was fresh fruit, followed by a trio of vices: chocolate, cheese, and wine. (See the breakdown on the facing page.)

We shopped 20 of the top gift-basket companies to find offerings that most closely match the variety of treats that our survey respondents said they were most eager to receive. We then picked four baskets and ordered two samples of each (because contents—and price—can vary or be customized). Then our testers had an early holiday feast in Consumer Reports' labs. Here's what we found:



GOLDEN STATE FRUIT
Grand Abundance Wine and Fruit Gift Basket

$140 TO $145
FRUIT 3 to 4 pears, 2 to 3 oranges
CHOCOLATE 5 squares of chocolate, 4 chocolate-covered salted caramels (one basket)
CHEESE 8 ounces of sharp Italian
WINE 1 bottle (chosen from 4 white and red)
OTHER 4 triangles of baklava (one basket), crackers, salted cashews or rosemary almonds
RESULTS Some of the pears were overripe, but the oranges were tender, juicy, and sweet. The chocolate, crackers, and nuts were flavorful, and the caramels were buttery. You can select one of four wines; we tried the 2013 La Crema Sonoma Coast Chardonnay and a 2012 Murphy-Goode Cabernet Sauvignon. Both were Very Good, although the cab might have improved a bit with age.
WINE RATING Very Good
FOOD RATING Very Good



HARRY & DAVID
Deluxe Favorites

$127 TO $130
FRUIT 8 pears
CHOCOLATE 6 truffles, 2 ounces of milk-chocolate mini-mints, 6 ounces of chocolate-covered cherries
CHEESE 4 ounces of cheddar
WINE 1 bottle (chosen from 15 white and red)
OTHER 5 ounces of raspberry galettes, 10 ounces of Moose Munch, 10 ounces of pepper-onion relish
RESULTS The pears ripened to a quality that Harry & David is known for. Truffles and mini-mints were decent; cherries tasted more cherry than chocolate. The Moose Munch and cookies were good, the relish delightfully spicy, and the cheese sharp and flavorful. One basket had a tasty but unbalanced 2012 Harry & David Vineyards Merlot, the other a 2013 Harry & David Vineyards Chardonnay, which was short on fruit.
WINE RATING Good
FOOD RATING Very Good



GIFTTREE
The Premium Selection

$148
FRUIT 1 to 3 plums, grapes, 2 to 3 peaches, 4 bananas (one basket), 2 to 3 pears, 3 to 4 apples, pineapple (one basket)
CHOCOLATE 1 ounce of almond bark, 2 ounces of caramel crisp
CHEESE 8 ounces of cheddar
WINE 2 bottles (red and/or white)
OTHER 4 ounces of crackers, 4 caramels, 5 ounces of biscotti, 3 ounces of wafer cookies
RESULTS Except for the bananas and grapes, the fruit was just okay. Baskets vary depending on location. One included items (such as Pepperidge Farm cookies) easily found in grocery stores. The almond bark and cheese were delicious. One basket had a Very Good 2013 Dreaming Tree Chardonnay Central Coast. The other wines—2014 Cloud Break Sauvignon Blanc, 2011 Poggio San Pietro Toscana Rosso, 2012 Primal Roots Red Blend—were Good.
WINE RATING Good to Very Good
FOOD RATING Good



WINE COUNTRY
Eastpoint Cellars Wine and Fruit Collection

$128
FRUIT 3 apples, 3 pears, 5 oranges
CHOCOLATE 1 ounce of chocolate caramels
CHEESE 6 garlic-and-herb cheese wedges
WINE 2 bottles (1 red, 1 white)
OTHER 1.5 ounces of fruit and nuts, 1 ounce of hard candy, 3 ounces of brownie cookies, 1 ounce of shortbread, 3 ounces of wafers
RESULTS The fruit quality varied; oranges were best. The caramels had little flavor, and the cheese tasted processed and slightly sour. Some cookies and crackers were stale. One basket had Very Good wines—a 2013 Eastpoint California Cabernet Sauvignon and a 2013 Eastpoint Central Coast Chardonnay. The other had the same wines, but the cab was from a less-impressive vintage.
WINE RATING Good to Very Good
FOOD RATING Good

Note: Gift-basket prices include shipping.

FRUITS OF OUR LABOR

Our national survey gave us a detailed picture of the country's gift-basket favorites. To show what that looks like with real food, treats, and wine, we went shopping. With $100, we went to Wegmans (a Consumer Reports top-rated supermarket) in Woodbridge, N.J., plus a few specialty shops, and ended up with a great big grocery bag of goodies. America, here's your gift basket! (A basket and shipping will cost extra.)



*Three percent of respondents said, "none of these," and 1 percent said, "unsure." To us that meant $4 worth of crackers.

PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

FOR THE

MOVERS & SHAKERS

They have a jam-packed life and want to live to the max. Here's an array of fun gifts to equip them for it.



Star of the Show

GoPro Hero4 Silver $390

This lightweight action cam lets the wearer be an auteur with its built-in wireless and 1.7-inch touch-screen display, not to mention the arsenal of GoPro mounts and accessories. It delivers good-quality video and pictures. And it performs just fine 100 feet underwater, according to our tests. It doesn't have an image stabilizer, though, so prepare for some shaky-cam footage if you take it off-road.



Picture-Perfect

Panasonic Lumix DMC-G7K $800

Thanks to a mirrorless design, the Lumix DMC-G7K squeezes the flexibility of an SLR into a compact body, but it truly stands out for its high-quality image capture and cutting-edge functionality. It takes very good photos and can record 4K video. It has a swiveling touch-screen display, built-in wireless, and an excellent image stabilizer. In our tests it rates high in low-light performance, battery life, audio quality, and speed of operation.



Photos to Go

Canon PowerShot N100 $350

This compact point-and-shoot offers a 4x zoom lens and netted Very Good picture quality in our tests. Plus it plays nice with mobile devices, transmitting photos to phones, tablets, and computers using built-in Wi-Fi. It can even upload directly to Facebook. The large touch-screen display swivels to aid in composition. And a Creative Shot mode lets the user apply Instagram-like filters to alter and crop photos.



Portable Power

Goal Zero Lighthouse 250 Lantern $80

Beneath that lamp and flashing red light, the Goal Zero has an internal battery capable of stowing 4400mAh of power—enough to recharge an iPhone 6s twice, with electricity to spare. For unforeseen emergencies, it also features a hand crank, though you might not want to lean too heavily on that. Five minutes worth of toil adds only 1 percentage point to the phone's battery-life indicator.



Personal Perks

Chefman My Barista RJ30 $80

If you have someone on your gift list whose theme-song lyrics include "I'm late! I'm late! For a very important date!" you won't go wrong with this super-speedy single-serve coffeemaker. In our tests, this speed demon made a good fresh-brewed mug of joe and is one of the least expensive models you'll find. It takes K-Cups or loose grounds and is available in white, red, or black.

SHOPAHOLICS (AND NOT)

MILLENNIALS TEND TO ENJOY SHOPPING FOR GIFTS MORE THAN OTHER AGE GROUPS. 57% SAY THEY LOVE OR LIKE IT.

PHOTO, LEFT: VEER



Multitasker

Pebble Time $200

Many widely sold smartwatches offer fancy touch screens, advanced fitness functions, and wireless wallets—they try to do so much at once that their batteries are spent after a single day. Pebble designs for simplicity. This watch has a built-in heart-rate monitor and a no-frills, energy-efficient color screen that Pebble claims will last three to seven days on a charge. The interface is easy to operate. In short, the Time gives you the features you want at a fraction of the Apple Watch's price. Pairs with Android (4.0 or later) and Apple (iOS 8) devices. Available in black, white, or red.



Easy Listening

Bose SoundLink Color $130

Whether you like Lady Gaga or Frank Sinatra, this wireless speaker makes for a great traveling companion. Compact and intuitive, it delivers good sound at a nice price, and it's easy to pair with any Bluetooth-enabled device. For non-Bluetooth devices, it has an old-school port for a wire. When choosing a gift, make sure you know your intended's favorite color because it comes in red, white, blue, black, or mint.





Sounds Nice!

Scosche SportClip 3 $30

Music can be a mighty motivator when you're working out, but there's no need to pay top dollar for headphones if your giftee is just going to sweat all over them. These in-ear models have a snug fit and very good sound at a bargain price. They also come with a remote and microphone on the cord for selecting tunes and fielding calls—but that functionality works only with Apple devices.

How to Avoid 'Regifting' Regrets

Recycling unwanted presents is perfectly fine as long as you follow the rules

YOU'VE OPENED ALL of your holiday gifts and you're surveying the haul. There are two problem children: a neon Hawaiian shirt that you'd never willingly wear, and a book about backyard chicken coops, even though you live on the 44th floor of a high-rise. Is it okay to rewrap those treasures and pass them on to someone who may actually appreciate them?

Those who "recycle" presents were dissed on a classic "Seinfeld" episode, when Elaine was outraged to discover that a friend had passed along a label maker she had given him–to Jerry, of all people. "I knew it!" Elaine exclaimed when she showed up on her friend's doorstep to ask to see the label maker. "You're a regifter!"

But times have changed, and the regifting stigma has gone the way of new "Seinfeld" episodes. Three out of four Americans surveyed by American Express in 2014 considered regifting perfectly acceptable. And a 2015 Consumer Reports nationally representative survey of 1,000 adults in the U.S. found that one in five regift holiday presents they don't want.

The rules that follow will help you do it right–and stay out of trouble:

• **Regift only brand-new items that match the recipient's tastes.** Unless you're passing down a family heirloom, any regift should be unused, and it should be something you would have bought for that person.

• **Search for telltale signs of regifting before wrapping a gift.** Make absolutely sure you remove any gift tags or cards from that Hawaiian shirt before you put it back in its original packaging and rewrap it. And if you're regifting the book on backyard chickens, check to make sure there's no inscription to you. "I know someone who got a dress shirt as a gift from his father, but when he pulled it out of the box, he saw that it was monogrammed with his dad's initials," says Kit Yarrow, Ph.D., a consumer psychologist and author of "Decoding the New Consumer Mind: How and Why We Shop and Buy" (Jossey-Bass, 2014). Oops.



THANKS ANYWAY

35% HANG ON TO GIFTS THEY DON'T WANT.

• **Make sure the giver and receiver won't cross paths.** Regifting among immediate family members is a no-no. Imagine your mother walking into your sister's house next Thanksgiving and seeing her in the sweater she knit especially for you. The same goes for friends in the same social circle.

• **Keep track of who gave what, so that you don't sabotage yourself.** "One of the best stories I've heard was from a woman who gave her friend a beautiful set of coasters as a housewarming gift," Yarrow says. "A couple of years later, when that friend traveled to visit her, she brought along a hostess gift that turned out to be that same set of coasters–still unused in the original packaging–because she'd forgotten who had given them to her in the first place."

• **When in doubt, remind yourself that you're reducing waste.** "I love regifting because it's actually a wonderful form of recycling," says Elaine Swann, a lifestyle and etiquette expert based in Los Angeles. "And if you don't have someone else in mind who would appreciate that gift, donate it to a charity so it ends up with someone who could really use it."

LEARN

Stay on top of holiday shopping trends throughout the season. You can do that at ConsumerReports.org/holidays

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW HOLLISTER



The Gift of Last Resort?

Choose carefully when it comes to gift cards

GIFT CARDS are big business; about half of all shoppers in the U.S. plan to give one, according to a Consumer Reports poll. And the amount we spend on those quick and easy gifts has risen steadily since 2009, to almost $32 billion in 2014, the National Retail Federation estimates.

It's easy to understand why the cards are so popular. For recipients, they're "found" money. For harried shoppers, they solve the problem of what to buy for the impossible to buy for, whether it's a finicky teenager, a co-worker, or a friend with a particular passion.

The Best Cards to Buy

There are two basic types. Merchant-specific gift cards bear the name of a retailer or restaurant and are redeemable only at that spot. Bank cards carry the logo of a payment card network like American Express, Discover, MasterCard, or Visa. They can be spent wherever that payment method is accepted. Bank cards usually have a purchase fee of $4 to $6.

Consumer Reports used to warn people about bank cards because they often came with short expiration dates, service charges, and inactivity fees. In fact, our opposition to them became the cornerstone of a highly publicized campaign for more consumer-friendly regulations. Since federal rules took effect in 2010 addressing the worst problems, we no longer advise consumers not to use them.

SHOULD YOU GAMBLE ON GIVING LOTTERY TICKETS?

Lottery tickets may be the ultimate no-labor gift, and they add extra oomph to a greeting card. They're fun for the giftee, too, allowing him or her to fantasize, even momentarily, about early retirement in Grenada or paying off college bills. Never mind that the odds of winning a major jackpot are about one in a few hundred million. On the bright side, the odds of winning enough to buy a mocha latte with whipped cream are actually within reach, at one in 55. Almost $40 billion in prizes were awarded through state lottery funds in 2013, the last year for which figures are available.

But think carefully about who will be on the receiving end. Although it may seem harmless to give a teenager an instant lottery ticket, for example, those who receive them as gifts may be more likely to gamble at an earlier age than those who don't, according to the Journal of Adolescent Health. And just as it's illegal for minors in most states to buy lottery tickets, it's also illegal for them to cash in winners.

What if you do happen to give away a winning ticket? Legally speaking, a gift is a gift, so don't expect a cut of the haul. Bennett Gershman, a professor at Pace Law School in New York, says that the winner is under no legal obligation to share.

So if you think you'd feel resentful if someone you gave a ticket to hit the jackpot, don't do it in the first place. "Gifts are given without expecting anything in return," says Patricia Napier-Fitzpatrick of the Etiquette School of New York. "Of course the gift could be given with conditions, but what kind of gift would that be?"

Even if the winner wants to throw a few bills your way to say thank you, Internal Revenue Service rules cap the amount of money that can be given tax-free ($14,000 per recipient in 2015).

And what if you receive a lottery ticket and you're a lucky winner? Sign it right away. Otherwise, if you lose it, someone else can cash in on your holiday good fortune.

PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

Today, cards can't expire for at least five years from the purchase date or from the last date any additional money was loaded onto it. If the expiration date is earlier than either of those dates, the money can be transferred to a replacement card at no cost. Issuers are required to disclose expiration dates and any fees on the card or packaging; inactivity fees kick in only after a year.

Avoid These Traps

With the new rules, gift cards are a better buy than they used to be. But you can still fall prey to scams and other pitfalls.

• **Fake or stolen cards.** Avoid online auction sites that offer cards because they may be counterfeit or stolen, the Federal Trade Commission warns.

• **Discounted cards.** Inspect cards before you buy them to make sure that the codes on the back haven't been scratched off, which could indicate that the card has been drained of its value.

• **Hefty fees.** Our holiday polls a few years ago revealed that as many as 15 percent of gift givers had at least one unused gift card almost a year after receiving it. The main reasons were that shoppers said they didn't have time to use them, they couldn't find anything they wanted to buy, or they simply forgot they had them.

• **Shaky retailers.** A card from a company that files for bankruptcy or goes out of business could wind up being worthless. So be wary of companies making negative financial news.

It's a good idea to give recipients the receipt for the card, too, so they can verify its purchase in case it's lost or stolen. Also write down the card's ID number, and register the card if possible. (Both will probably be required to get a replacement.) If you have a problem with a card, contact the issuer. If you can't resolve a dispute, consider filing a complaint. For merchant cards, contact the FTC by phone (877-382-4357) or online (ftc.gov), or your state's attorney general (find yours at naag.org). For bank cards, contact the Comptroller of the Currency Customer Assistance Group, at 800-613-6743.

WHAT TO DO WITH UNWANTED GIFT CARDS

Your cousin no doubt meant well when he gave you a $50 gift card to Outback Steakhouse—he just didn't remember that you had become a vegan. But you can convert the card to cash.

Numerous card-exchange websites have emerged in recent years, offering to pay as much as 92 percent of a card's face value from merchants of all stripes: gas stations, hotels, department stores, restaurants, supermarkets, movie theaters, and specialty chains.

Although we have warned consumers about buying cards from those sites, companies say they verify the cards as legitimate and confirm their value. Once they do that, they send you a check, then try to resell the cards at a profit, though still at less than face value.

We checked out four gift card-exchange sites, eyeballing their policies and using their online calculators to determine how much we would get for 13 cards, each with a $100 face value. Here are the key lessons we learned in our experiment:

Not all cards are equally valuable. The purchase price depends on a merchant's popularity. Resellers were generally willing to pay more for Walmart and Whole Foods cards than for those from Brooks Brothers and Bass Pro Shops.

Prices vary from site to site. Monstergiftcard.com, for example, paid generously for Bed Bath & Beyond cards, but other sites paid a lot more for Coach cards. So it pays to comparison shop.

Personalized cards can be a problem. If your name is etched into it, you may not be able to sell it.

RETAILER	GIFTCARDS.COM	CARDPOOL.COM	GIFTCARDRESCUE.COM	MONSTERGIFTCARD.COM	AVERAGE VALUE
Walmart	$91.50	$91	$89	$90.26	$90.44
Whole Foods	$88.01	$83	$88	$87	$86.50
Tiffany & Co.	$84	$84	$85	$80	$83.25
Home Depot	$83.01	$83	$81	$82.50	$82.38
Bed Bath & Beyond	$82.78	$82	$80	$82.77	$81.88
Macy's	$80.50	$79	$80	$70	$77.38
Ticketmaster	$84.50	$83	$85	$50	$75.63
Coach	$85.10	$85	$80	$50	$75.03
Toys "R" Us	$80.50	$79	$70	$50	$69.88
Bonefish Grill	$76	$72	$76	$50	$68.50
Sephora	$80.50	$70	$70	$50	$67.63
Brooks Brothers	$74.01	$71	$73	$50	$67
Bass Pro Shops	$74	$72	$63	$50	$64.75
Total	$1,064.41	$1,034	$1,020	$842.53	$990.25



Should You Give a Car?

It might make more sense to cut a big check

WE'VE ALL SEEN those TV ads, where happy couples wow each other with the holiday gift of a 5,000-pound, $50,000, red ribbon-wrapped luxury vehicle. To be sure, a brand-new set of wheels is the holiday fantasy gift for some Americans. But does it ever really make sense to gift a car?

"These holiday sales events are not really about people buying cars for loved ones," says Ian Beavis, chief strategy officer at automotive marketing consultants AMCI. "The bows or gift imagery are all devices to aid memorability in a very cluttered TV environment."

If you're thinking of giving a gift that goes vroom, December is the month for it. That's when consumers have the most bargaining leverage at the dealership, according to TrueCar data.

Among 2012 to 2014 sales transactions, December had the largest average discount off the manufacturer's suggested retail price, at 7.5 percent, according to TrueCar.

"Last December was absolutely the best month of the year for deals," says TrueCar spokesman Alan Ohnsman. "Black Friday has become a major opportunity for dealers to promote year-end deals."

With that in mind, let's say you have your heart set on giving a car as a holiday gift. How will that gift go over?

First, consider who is on the receiving end. As the snowflake-sprinkled commercials might suggest, the most common gift is most likely from one spouse to another or from a parent to a child. Give outside of the immediate family, and, in most states, the recipient will have to pay sales tax on it–anywhere from 2 to 12 percent. "If it's between in-laws or friends, it might be easier to just give them a check," says Seung Min Yu, an automotive analyst for Consumer Reports.

Then, of course, you need to make sure that it is the car of their dreams–not yours. Returning a gift of this size–if that's even possible–is more trouble than thinking of another gift.

Choose wrong, and you and your loved one will be dealing with a very costly, long-term misunderstanding.

"A woman told me her husband gave her a car with a big bow on top for Christmas, just like the ads you see on TV," says Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist who teaches at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. "But unlike the scenes in the ads, she wasn't delighted by it. She felt cheated because she'd had no say in picking out the

PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

car, and it was really a family purchase, rather than a gift specifically for her."

The more practical, if less romantic, move is to take Yu's advice. Write a check to help with the down payment, promise to ride shotgun during the test drives, and point your loved one in the direction of a good deal.

Certain brands, including Hyundai, offer matching incentives to those with "social spending" dollars gifted from friends and relatives. And if you have a college kid on your gifting list, you can urge him or her to enroll in the GM College Discount program. Details on the General Motors program are at gmcollegediscount.com. Other brands have student discounts as well.

Like depositing a puppy on a doorstep, leaving a car in the driveway really can be a gift that keeps on taking. In the case of the woman mentioned above, "They also have shared family finances, so they are now making monthly payments on a car that they both drive," Yarrow says. "Some Christmas gift!"

In addition to monthly payments, considerations include insurance and registration–not to mention gas. So perhaps the first step is to make sure the recipient's pockets are deep enough to fit more than just keys. That way, you'll avoid giving them a December to remember–for the wrong reasons.

THEN THERE'S THE BOW ...

Yes, you really can get one of those huge bows that they put on cars in holiday commercials. King Size Bows (kingsizebows.com), based in California, sells them in sizes ranging from 2 to 12 feet in diameter. According to company owner Jan Kingaard, the big bows aren't just for cars; customers use them to decorate everything from jet planes to buildings. Ready-made bows start at $40, and custom jobs can go into the thousands. And don't worry about your gift's paint job, the in-stock bows come with rubber feet to prevent scratching.

BUT WILL IT FIT UNDER THE TREE?

If someone has been nice, here's some four-wheeled spice



For Your Kids

Subaru Impreza Sport
$18,695-$23,295

Annual trips moving into and out of the dorm are helped by this roomy hatchback's interior. Top-notch crash-test results, all-wheel drive, and available EyeSight safety gear keep your kids safe.

Other options
Mazda3, Kia Soul

For Your Spouse

Porsche Macan
$50,895-$73,295

For those willing to put up with below-average reliability, this dynamic, responsive crossover scored highest in our road tests. Think of it as a 911 that got comfy in middle age.

Other options
Audi A6 2.0T, BMW X3





For Your Parents

Chevrolet Impala $27,885-$36,265

There are great deals on this spacious, well-equipped sedan. A lot of folks think the Impala is still a crummy rental car, rather than a significantly upgraded sedan. That means dealers are pushing a strong car out the door with cash on the hood.

Other options Toyota Camry Hybrid, Hyundai Genesis

FOR THE

PLEASURE-SEEKER

Indulge your loved ones with gifts that will add sweet succor to their days and nights.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



PHOTO, BOTTOM: JAMES WORRELL; PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH



Ready to Chill

Haier WC200GS $980

For the true wine lover, this dual-zone wine chiller will let him or her serve prized bottles at just the right temperature—say, 45° F for that signature sauvignon blanc and 60° F for a favorite full-bodied syrah. The 42-bottle undercabinet unit, which can be built-in or freestanding, delivered solid temperature control in our tests, essential for long-term storage. Its partial-extension racks allow for easy bottle removal—good for when the festivities are going strong.

A Crisp Start

Cuisinart Breakfast Central WAF-300 $100

Nothing says "Good morning, honey!" better than a plate of crispy Belgian waffles, which this Cuisinart did over and over, with aplomb, in our tests. A "ready" light and an audible beep let you know when the waffle iron has finished preheating, and once you pop in the batter, those signals again alert you when it's time to dig in. Plus, the removable nonstick waffle plates are easy to clean.



Rise & Shine

KitchenAid Siphon KCM0812 $200

Siphon coffeemakers are one of the coolest science experiments available to the coffee cognoscenti. But traditional siphon brewers require open flames and a Ph.D. in molecular gastronomy to operate. KitchenAid has made the process accessible to the rest of us with this electric model—and so it should land on your gift list for your true coffee aficionado. The process is slow, but the results are worth the wait. Ground coffee is added to the top; water is added to the bottom, which sits on a heating element. As it gets warmer, vapor builds, forcing the heated water through the tube and into the upper chamber, where it mixes with the grounds. The circulating vapor swirls the water around in the grounds. Meanwhile, the heat below shuts off, and as the water vapor cools, it creates a vacuum that draws the coffee back down into the carafe. We brewed many more carafes than we actually needed for testing.





Force of Nature

Speakman Reaction $25

Whether or not your intended giftee is a morning person, he or she will appreciate this super showerhead. A satisfying soak, low water use, and fun colors make this low-flow showerhead an easy and attractive way to save water. Our staffers preferred the feel and forcefulness of the 2.5-gallon-per-minute version over the 2-gpm one, though about half said they'd buy either version—and that was before we told them how inexpensive it is. Available with a translucent blue, green, or gray frame.



Warm Thoughts

Dyson AM09 $450

The AM09 space heater aced our tests for room and spot heating, and it's better looking than most of its competition—admittedly a pretty low bar! Dyson stays cool to the touch, which helped it do well in our fire-safety tests, and includes a remote so that you don't have to stoop to turn it on. One quibble is the noise at higher settings.



No More Cold Feet

Vornado SRTH $45

Have an always-cold office mate on your gift list? She'll thank you for this small-enough-to-fit-under-a-desk personal heater. It's quiet, draws less power than larger units, and aced our fire-safety test. Just don't expect it to heat a whole room.

Pizza Party

Black & Decker 5-Minute Pizza Oven & Snack Maker P300S $150

Who doesn't love pizza anytime of the year? That's why this pizza oven lands on our "best gifts" list. Pizzas—whether homemade or frozen—cooked much faster in this countertop model than in a conventional oven; our fresh, thin-crust pizza took just 5 minutes. Once your giftee gets the hang of which settings are best for each type of pie, he or she will love to get the party started.





Living Large

Samsung UN60JU6500 $1,600

A big-screen TV is a gift the whole family can enjoy. Our tests reveal that this 60-inch ultra HD set has excellent picture quality, plus Samsung's smart TV feature for access to streaming shows and movies, apps, and even the Web itself. Its four HDMI inputs are enough to accommodate a cable box, a game console, a Blu-ray player, and a computer. But wait—there's more: three USB ports to unleash the photos, music, and videos stored on flash drives. It's also easy to set up and navigate—especially handy if the gift arrives on a holiday morning—and compared with many other UHD TVs, it's a bargain.

FROM ME TO ME

39% OF PEOPLE SAY THEY'LL BUY THEMSELVES A HOLIDAY GIFT THIS YEAR. WOMEN ARE SLIGHTLY MORE LIKELY THAN MEN TO TREAT THEMSELVES.

Moisture Maker

HoMedics UHE-CM25 $55

Quiet and easy to use, this humidifier performed well with regular or hard water. It's also easy to clean, a must with all humidifiers to avoid bacteria and mold growth.





Quiet Comfort

Crane Owl $45

New baby in someone's life? This humidifier from Crane's Adorables line is top-rated for its excellent output and is super-quiet, too. Crane's menagerie also includes penguins, tigers, polar bears, and more.

PHOTO, TOP: GETTY IMAGES



Pure Taste

Clear2O CWS100A
Water Filter $30

This budget-friendly carafe-style water filter does the job of built-in models at a tenth of the price. It was excellent in our tests at capturing lead and chloroform—a surrogate for organic compounds such as atrazine and benzene, as well as for particulates in water that give it a bad taste. One caveat: Some user reviews cite trouble connecting the Clear2O to their faucet, so an additional hose extension may be needed.

Superior Sound

Grado Prestige SR325e $300

These high-quality, over-the-ear headphones earned our top rating for good reason: Superior sound comes from the swiveling ear cups, housed in aluminum. They have a cool retro '60s look, too. And thanks to the open-air design, they won't keep you from hearing the doorbell when the UPS man arrives with other gifts you've ordered.



LEFT SPEECHLESS

35% OF PEOPLE SAY THEY HAVE RECEIVED AN AWFUL HOLIDAY GIFT AND DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY.

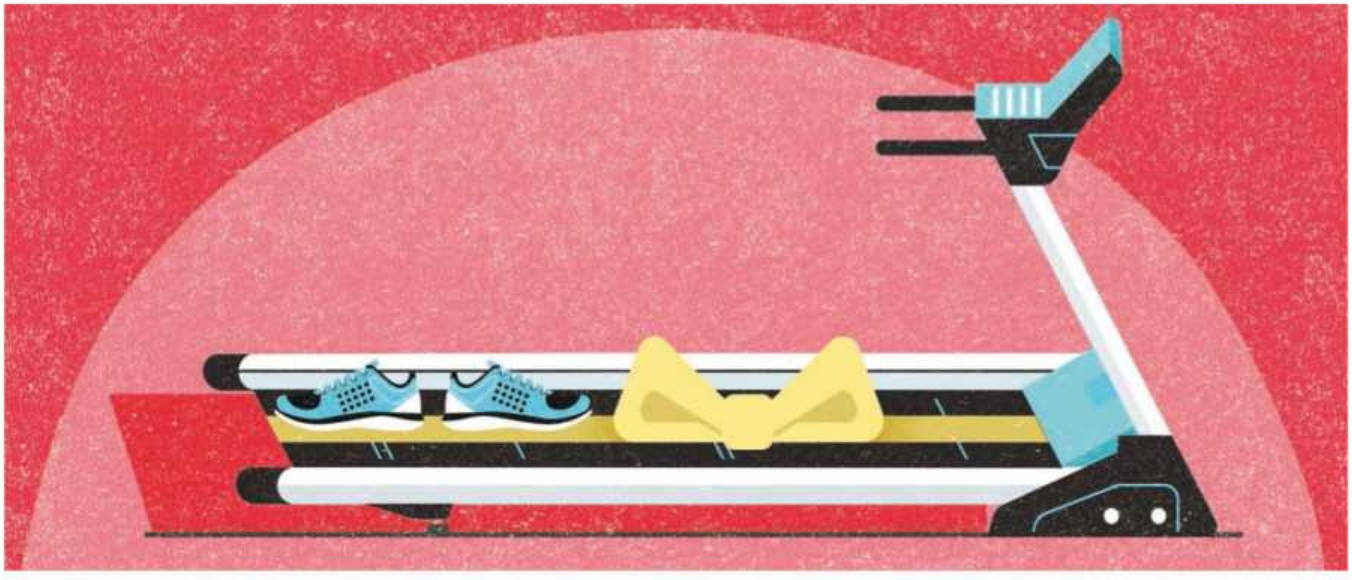


Clean & Efficient

Samsung WA52J8700AP
Samsung DV52J8700EP
$1,000 each

Are you and your siblings pitching in to get your parents a new washer and dryer? Then we suggest you choose this perfect pair. The washer can handle large loads and was impressive in our tests at cleaning. It has a built-in washboard and water jet for soaking and pretreating tough stains, and the dryer is Energy Star-qualified and can be used in regular or energy-saving mode.

PHOTO, TOP LEFT: JAMES WORRELL; PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH



No, *Really*, You Shouldn't Have

Make sure your gift isn't delivering an unintended message

MOST GIFTS ARE GIVEN with the best intentions. And of course it's bad manners to be ungrateful. But if the holiday present from your mother-in-law is a gift certificate for six months of weekly housecleaning services, should you feel paranoid—or maybe even insulted?

Just remember to consider the context. If she does that after visiting your new house for the first time, you're probably right that's she's pegged you as a slob. But if the gift arrives shortly after you've given birth to twins, it's probably a thoughtful gesture.

A holiday gift can say a lot—even unwittingly—about the relationship between the gifter and the giftee, says Elizabeth Dunn, Ph.D. a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia who has done research on the emotional effects of gift giving. A box of chocolates, for example, could be just a standard-issue gift. Or, if it's given by your notoriously jealous sister, who knows you've just dropped 25 pounds, it actually may be a passive-aggressive act.

So does that mean you should never buy someone a gift that could be construed as controversial? No, but make sure your sensitivity antenna are way up, says Jodi R.R. Smith, president of the etiquette consulting firm Mannersmith. For example, if your partner has been saying that he or she wants to get an activity tracker as part of a plan to exercise more and lose a few pounds, consider getting a pair of matching Fitbits with the stated goal of exercising together, Smith suggests. That also sends the message that you'd enjoy spending more time together.

But there are some items that are too emotionally charged to ever be received graciously, according to Kit Yarrow, a consumer psychologist. "Buying gifts like an acne-treatment kit, tummy-control undergarments, or books on parenting advice may be well-intentioned, but just don't do it," she says. "Especially during the holidays, when people really don't want to be reminded about the red bumps on their faces, their large behinds, or their shortcomings as parents."

ANOTHER REINDEER SWEATER?

WHY DO PEOPLE THINK THEY GET AWFUL GIFTS? 41% SAY THE GIFT GIVER DIDN'T KNOW THEM VERY WELL; 25% SAY THE GIVER WAS JUST CHEAP.



Tackling a tough chore and getting great results is a reward in itself. Here, terrific tools that work hard can be a great present.

FOR THE

DO-IT-YOURSELFER



Give It a Spin

Hitachi DS18DSAL $170

The do-it-yourselfer you need to get a gift for will be thrilled with this Hitachi cordless drill. Almost as fast and powerful as heavy-duty models, this 18-volt drill weighs just 3.4 pounds. Its ½-inch chuck can handle more bits for larger holes than drills with a ⅜-inch chuck, and its two speed ranges mean you're ready for anything from turning tight screws to drilling through metal. It comes with a smart charger, an LED work light, and two lithium-ion batteries—good news because recharging takes about 10 minutes longer than most other lithium-ion models. We also found that its handle is especially comfortable.

Lumber Jack or Jill

Stihl MS 180 C-BE $230



Ultrafast cutting and relatively light weight make this gas-powered chain saw easy to use and hold for extended sessions at the wood pile. A chain break, minimal kickback during cutting, and a durable blade cover add to its safety.



A Clean Machine

Ryobi RY802800 $330

This gas-powered pressure washer has helpful features that can help save time as well as safeguard delicate materials. It has a built-in soap tank that's easier to use and move around while working compared with the add-on bottle that some other models require. The wand has a flow control to clean sensitive surfaces more gently without changing tips. And there's a fuel shutoff, which lets you cut off gas to the carburetor and prevent harmful buildup that could cause start-up problems.



Let It Snow

Craftsman 88173 $680

Give the gift of snow-plowing bragging rights with this 24-inch two-stage model. It impressed us with its easy starting and the way it quickly and cleanly removed snow, even the dense piles at the end of the driveway that are left by the city plow. Its smaller size also means easier storage. Features include an overhead-valve engine, along with electric start and multiple speeds. But it lacks freewheel steering, so you'll need to put more muscle into turning this 162-pound machine.

CLOSE YOUR EYES

70% OF PEOPLE WOULD RATHER BE SURPRISED BY A HOLIDAY GIFT THAN GET SOMETHING THEY REQUESTED.

PHOTO: LITTLE OUTDOOR GIANTS/VAULT ARCHIVES



Buzz Cut

Worx Landroid WG794 $1,000

Mow the lawn from a lawn chair? The Worx offered the best cutting performance of all the robotic mowers we've tested, especially on non-hilly lawns. It's also the easiest to use and set up. That's important because if the grass grows too high, it's time to pull out a regular mower. Like any robot mower, the cuts aren't as neat as with a regular machine.



Spark for Mowing

EGO LM2000 $400

If chasing the winter blues is part of your holiday-cheer strategy, keep your eye on summer! Plan now by gifting this cordless electric push mower that's great for small yards with petite garages; in our tests, it ran for 35 minutes before needing a 30-minute recharge. Its padded handle is adjustable and telescopes down and flips forward so that the mower can lie flat or be folded and stored in a stand-up position. The EGO also comes with LED headlights in case you're mowing at dusk. Like other electric mowers, grass cutting is slightly uneven.



Pet Prowess

Kenmore Progressive 31069 $200

With strong airflow for tools and top-notch pet-hair pickup, this bagged upright offers helpful features usually found in vacuums that cost at least $100 more. It has a brush on/off switch, which safeguards a wood or laminate floor's finish and prevents scattering debris; suction control, which protects drapes from being pulled into the vac; and a manual carpet pile-height adjustment, which is more precise than automatic settings at matching the brush to the carpet. It also weighs less than many other top-ranked uprights.



Light and Lively

Hoover WindTunnel T-Series Rewind Bagless UH70120 $130

If happy holidays means never having to change messy vacuum bags again, this is a gift for you. This bagless upright offers impressive cleaning, lots of suction for tool attachments, easy maneuverability, and a retractable cord—all in a low-priced, relatively light machine that weighs just 18 pounds. It also has a manual carpet pile-height adjustment, which better matches the brush to the carpet.

Show Me the Money

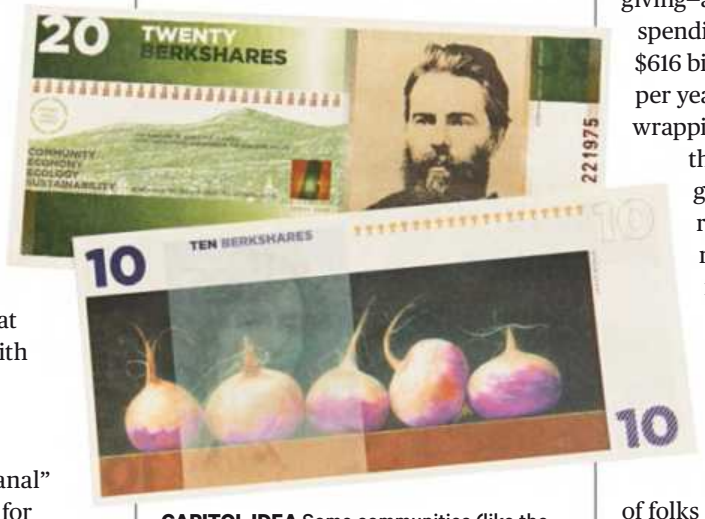
Why cash, including new artisanal local currency, is always a good gift

COLD HARD CASH. The phrase is the antithesis of the warm, fuzzy feelings associated with the holidays. No wonder that giving money as a gift has gotten a bad rap. But there's nothing "Bah! Humbug!" about it. Turns out, it's not only easy for the giver but also valued by the lucky person on the receiving end.

What's more, cash has a classic, comforting permanence—even more so in this age of bitcoin and PayPal, which begins to make money feel like a faraway abstraction. Certain currencies have had an extra allure, thanks to their iconic designs. Think of $2 bills, Kennedy silver dollars, or even the often maligned Susan B. Anthony coins. And there's no sign that will slow down, especially with the new $10 bill—featuring a woman—on the horizon.

Until then, the newest currency out there is new "artisanal" paper money created by and for people who live in certain regions. Designed to encourage citizens to support small businesses rather than chain stores, local currencies in the U.S. include BerkShares notes adorned with artwork—including the paintings of turnips shown here that can be spent only at participating businesses in western Massachusetts. Other examples are stamped clay tokens known as Santa Barbara Missions and Ithaca Hours, paper bills accepted by more than 300 establishments around Ithaca, N.Y. (Similar small-batch currencies also exist in a few spots in the United Kingdom and Germany.) Outside of the pertinent ZIP code those babies aren't worth zip.

But, welcome as cash might be to the recipient, is it tacky to give money, in whatever form? Not according to Jacqueline Whitmore, an etiquette expert based in Palm Beach, Fla., who notes, "It's rarely returned, and one size fits all." True, the sight of a pyramid of presents, festooned with ribbons and shiny wrapping paper, makes the heart beat faster. But the fact is, no one will turn their nose up at a fan of crisp Jacksons or a fresh-from-the-bank $100 bill. The Chinese have been on to that for eons, hence the tradition of handing out red envelopes called lai see at the New Year and other happy occasions. And who wouldn't remember the delight of slipping their hands into the pocket of a new bathrobe and finding—surprise!—a fresh-from-the-bank $50 bill?



CAPITOL IDEA Some communities (like the Berkshires) are printing their own money.

Some also argue that a gift is nothing more than devalued currency. As economist Joel Waldfogel points out in his book "Scroogenomics: Why You Shouldn't Buy Presents for the Holidays" (Princeton University Press, 2009), there's often a disparity between what giftees thought their presents had cost and what they would have been willing to pay if they bought those items for themselves.

A 1993 survey of 86 undergraduate students showed that the students estimated that their gifts had cost $438.20—but thriftily said that they wouldn't have shucked out more than $313.40 for them. A second poll two months later found an additional group of students who calculated the cost of their holiday haul at $508.90 on average—although they confessed that they valued the gifts at $462.10. Waldfogel calculates that approximately 20 percent of the value of holiday gifts is destroyed by gift-giving—and because annual holiday spending in the U.S. is approximately $616 billion, that's about $123 billion per year tossed out with the wrinkled wrapping paper. "Apart from the joy that givers get from choosing gifts and recipients get from receiving things, as a means of resource allocation, gift-giving is pretty bad," Waldfogel says.

In addition, recipients are getting pickier, says Evan Polman, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Consider the long lines of folks returning presents on December 26. Chalk up the boomerang phenomenon to an excess of options. "The more options someone has, the more she or he expects to find something that matches their preferences perfectly," Polman says.

And though gift cards can expire (see "The Gift of Last Resort?" on page 38), money is timeless. Cash may be hard and cold, but like bedrock, it endures. Barring regulatory changes that eliminate it, Ron Shevlin, director of research at Cornerstone Advisors, calculates that Americans will still be using paper currency in 200 years.

So we say: Show us the money. Just make sure it comes in a nice wrapping.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

Many Happy Returns

Just in case someone doesn't love your presents, here are some stores that don't hassle the dissatisfied

LET'S FACE IT: Shopping for other people is difficult. And sometimes even the best-intentioned gift giver gets it wrong. That's why it pays to pay attention to return policies when you're shopping, just in case things don't work out.

According to a new Consumer Reports nationally representative survey of 1,000 adults, a gift has to be a real doozy before it goes back; almost nine in 10 Americans rarely or never return a present. But 43 percent said they would seek a refund or exchange if they were on the receiving end of a truly cruddy gift.

To help minimize the problems, our resident shopping experts took a good look at customer-service policies for several major retailers. Read on to find out which retailers offer no-questions-asked satisfaction guarantees and which ones have rules that are far more restrictive.

Why the differences? Some companies are big enough to absorb losses from customers who may take advantage of ultra-generous policies by bringing back merchandise that has languished in their closets. The businesses are confident that the goodwill generated by lenient policies will outweigh the occasional bad behavior and increase the company's market share, says Jack Abelson of Abelson & Associates, retail consultants in Leawood, Kan. "They're not doing it to be nice or altruistic," he says. "That guarantee is built into the price of the product as just another cost of doing business."

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

86% SAY THEY RARELY OR NEVER RETURN HOLIDAY GIFTS.



Best in the Business

The following retailers have the best return policies we've seen, pledging unconditional satisfaction when you shop in their walk-in stores or online. Quotations describing how they stand behind what they sell are taken from their websites.

COSTCO. "100% satisfaction guaranteed. We guarantee your satisfaction on every product we sell with a full refund. We will refund your membership fee ($55) in full at any time if you are dissatisfied." There's no time limit for returning most items; for electronics, there's a very liberal 90-day limit from the purchase date.

EDDIE BAUER. "Every item we sell will give you complete satisfaction or you may return it for a full refund." That means anytime.

HARRY & DAVID. "You and those who receive your gifts must be delighted, or we'll make it right with either an

ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW HOLLISTER

appropriate replacement or refund. Always. Everything's guaranteed. No cutting corners. No fudging on quality. No excuses."

LANDS' END. If you're dissatisfied with any item, from sheets to slacks, return it anytime for a refund or exchange. The policy states: "We mean every word of it. Whatever. Whenever. Always. But to make sure this is perfectly clear, we've decided to simplify it further: Guaranteed. Period."

KOHL'S. Its "no questions asked, hassle-free" return policy for all purchases has no time limit. No receipt? No problem. Just go to a customer-service counter with the item for an exchange or store credit equal to the lowest price the item sold for in the past 13 weeks. That is, unless you paid with your Kohl's charge card. Associates can look up any order within 12 months and credit your account. Items bought with other credit cards or returned after the 12-month time frame earn you store credit.

L.L.BEAN. "Our products are guaranteed to give 100% satisfaction in every way. Return anything purchased from us at any time if it proves otherwise."

ORVIS. "We will refund your money on any purchase that isn't 100% satisfactory. Anytime, for any reason. It's that simple."

ZAPPOS. Free shipping on all domestic orders and free prepaid returns for up to a year, as long as the items are in their original condition.

Tough Customers

These merchants have different rules and timetables for different products, and they refuse to take back some items.

ABE'S OF MAINE. Its stingy 14-day return policy is loaded with exceptions: No returns on TVs larger than 24 inches, fitness equipment, large appliances, microwaves, wine coolers, humidifiers, marine and camping equipment, watches, sunglasses, laptops, bicycles, and more. It's also up to you to check for damage upon delivery; if you don't, and a TV or appliance is broken, you'll have to settle for servicing rather than replacement. In addition, if you cancel an order—even before it ships—Abe's may stick you with a processing fee of as much as 3.5 percent of the item's purchase price.

AMERICAN APPAREL. Items can be returned within 45 days (we criticized American Apparel for limiting returns of store purchases to 30 days several years ago), but the chain refuses to take back sale merchandise. Also not returnable: swimwear, intimate apparel, cosmetics and grooming products, and any item that's been laundered. So if the colors run, you're out of luck.

FOREVER 21. The apparel merchant has a significantly different policy for online and in-store returns. If you return an item to a retail location, you're limited to an exchange or credit. If you mail it back, you can get an actual refund, but you're also required to pay for return shipping.

GAMESTOP. You have 30 days from purchase or the date on the packing slip, only with a receipt. The video-gaming giant reserves the right to limit returns to unopened or defective products.

SEARS AND KMART. Those sister chains state, flat-out, that "refunds and exchanges will not be given without receipt." With a receipt, there's a 30-day return deadline for most products. At Sears, electronics, heaters, grills, and furniture are subject to a 15 percent restocking fee.

LEARN

What's the best way to ship packages? Find out and get more tips for hassle-free holidays at ConsumerReports.org/holidays

NO MORE 'RETURN REMORSE'

Follow these four tips for success.

1 **Don't open the box.** If you try to take back an item and the original packaging isn't intact, merchants may impose a restocking fee (often 15 percent of the purchase price). That's especially common for electronics. Other products, such as computer software, CDs, and DVDs, generally aren't returnable once their packaging has been opened, unless they're defective. And if products are missing tags, you may be stuck with them.

2 **Keep those gift receipts.** Make sure you don't toss them out with the wrapping paper, because merchants often turn you away if you don't have one. If you didn't get a gift receipt (and you don't want to ask the giver for the original), you may be eligible for store credit, though it may be in the amount of the lowest price the item sold for recently.

3 **Check return policies and note any time limits.** You can do that most easily online, or you can ask at a store's customer-service counter. Big merchants usually allow up to 90 days for most items to be returned, but they may have far shorter periods for certain goods. During the holidays, however, some retailers will extend their deadlines, often until late January. For items purchased online, note whether the merchant also has walk-in store locations and allows in-person returns. That way, you can avoid repacking the item and going to the post office, as well as paying return shipping costs.

4 **Bring ID.** Some chains, including Best Buy and Victoria's Secret, use computerized return-authorization systems to detect abuse. So you may be asked to show your driver's license or other government-issued ID when you return an item in person. Merchants scan and store data from your ID to track your history, noting such factors as the frequency of your returns, their dollar value, how often you return items without a receipt, and the time between returns.

ConsumerReports® **Build & Buy**™ Car Buying Service

Car buying should be transparent.

See what others in your area paid for the car you want so you know when you're getting a good deal.

Negotiation-free guaranteed savings off MSRP*

Pricing data for each vehicle

Consumer Reports recommendation for qualified vehicles

Nationwide network of dealers



Don't overpay.

ConsumerReports.org/carbuying

* Guaranteed Savings not available in all states. In these states, a "Target Price" is presented, which reflects a market-based example of what you can reasonably expect to pay for a vehicle with your desired options. Savings is guaranteed by the dealer and not Consumer Reports or TrueCar. Guaranteed Savings may not be available on select models or trims. See site for details.

** Between 4/1/14 and 6/30/14, the average estimated savings off MSRP presented by TrueCar Certified Dealers to users of the Build & Buy Car Buying Service based on users who configured virtual vehicles and subsequently purchased a new vehicle of the same make and model listed on the certificate from Certified Dealers, was $2,990 including applicable vehicle specific manufacturer incentives. Your actual savings may vary based on multiple factors including the vehicle you select, region, dealer, and applicable vehicle specific manufacturer incentives which are subject to change. The Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price ("MSRP") is determined by the manufacturer, and may not reflect the price at which vehicles are generally sold in the dealer's trade area as not all vehicles are sold at MSRP. Each dealer sets its own pricing. Neither TrueCar nor Consumer Reports brokers, sells or leases motor vehicles.

Road

REPORT

BIGGEST NEW CAR GRIPES

The top five problem areas for new cars, highlighted in the red boxes, were reported by owners in our annual survey, based on more than 740,000 vehicles. Ten other items also showed up high on the list of troubles. For a full report of the most and least reliable cars, SUVs, and trucks, turn the page.

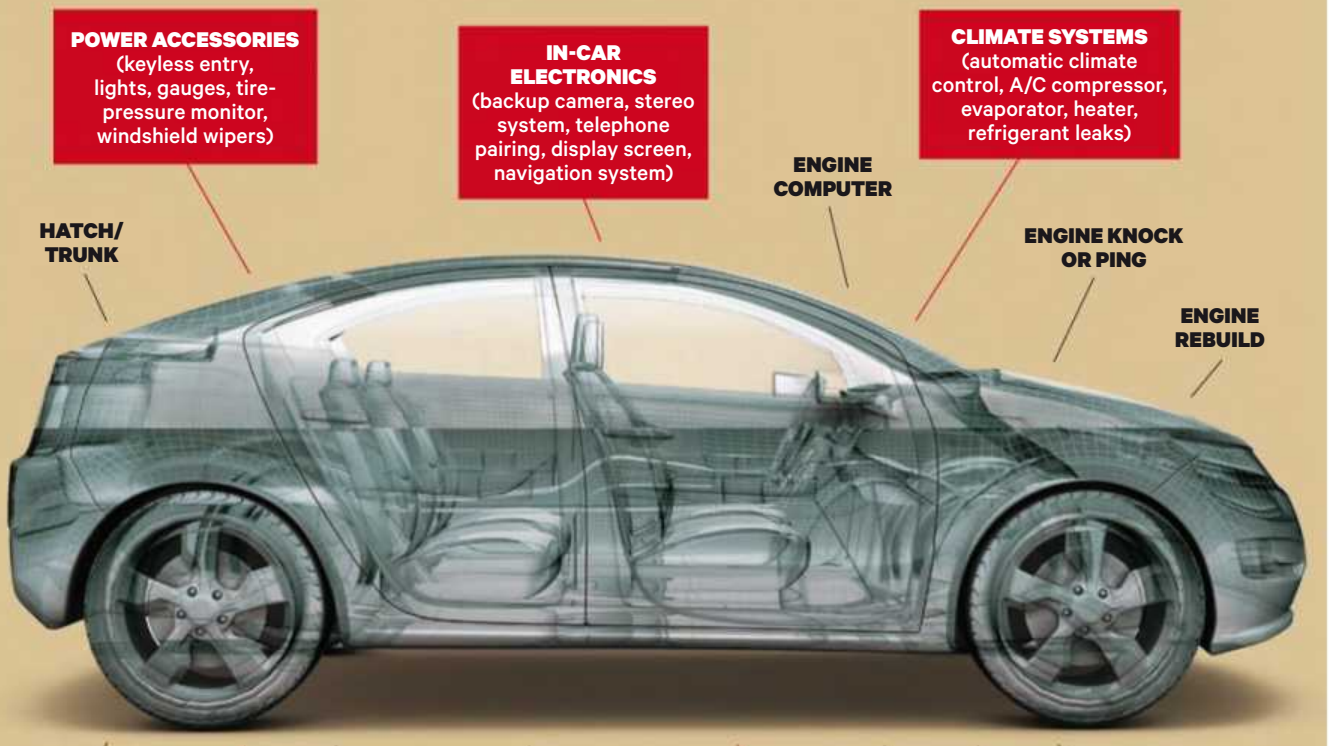


PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

THE MOST & LEAST RELIABLE CARS

Who's up, who's down, and what systems are causing major problems

CONTINUING STRUGGLES with communications and infotainment systems, as well as problems with recently developed transmission technologies, are the top trouble areas reported in Consumer Reports' 2015 Annual Auto Survey.

Consumers want their car infotainment systems to be as capable as the latest smartphones. But vehicles have lengthy development and production cycles, which means that car tech often lags behind the rapid-fire release of smartphones and apps. As a result, many infotainment systems end up disappointing consumers in terms of how they operate and how reliably they operate.

More troubling is that many new transmissions developed to help meet heightened fuel-economy standards are having some significant problems. That's happening whether it's a complex system such as a dual-clutch gearbox, a continuously variable transmission, or one with eight or nine speeds. Many vehicles require repair and replacements because of rough shifting among the gears and slipping CVT belts.

Those trouble areas have resulted in several automakers dropping sharply in our predicted-reliability scores, which



KIA SORENTO
The Korean brand had the industry's most reliable midsized SUV.



are based on subscribers reporting on more than 740,000 vehicles in their garages. But other automakers have seen sharp movement upward. Among the highlights:

• Two Korean automakers, Kia and Hyundai, are considerably stronger. The sister brands finished sixth and ninth, respectively. For the first time, Kia beat the stalwart Japanese brand Honda, and by a significant margin.

• Lexus pulled off a rare feat, garnering top reliability marks for all seven vehicle lines scored in our survey. But it was the only strong Japanese luxury brand. Honda's Acura brand has plummeted because of problems with in-car electronics and new transmissions. Nissan's Infiniti brand has continued its downward trajectory because of similar problems with its InTouch infotainment system.

• Although no Honda vehicles rated below average, the badge doesn't shine like it used to, largely because of glitches with its infotainment system in redesigned and freshened models.

• For the second year, Buick was the only domestic brand in the top 10. Cadillac dropped to near the bottom, still plagued by its CUE infotainment system.

• Ford remains in the lower half of the rankings but showed significant gains, with most of its cars scoring average or better. The redesigned F-150 was a bright spot, scoring above average in its first year. But the first-year Mustang had issues with its body hardware, drive shaft, and stability/traction control systems.

• Audi, once a sinkhole of service problems, continued its recent roll and finished third, just behind Lexus and Toyota.

• The laggards? The Fiat-Chrysler brands (Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep, Ram, and Fiat) finished at or near the bottom again.

In commenting on the automaker's poor performance, Matt Liddane, vice president of quality for Fiat Chrysler Automotive North America, said: "We greatly value customer feedback. We're significantly accelerating our pace of improvement. We need to continue to push harder."

Our survey is a measure of how reliable a new car you buy today is likely to be, based on the past three model years of problem areas reported by consumers. (For more, see "How to Use the Charts," on page 65.)

Note that new-car predicted-reliability scores are separate from our road-test scores, which are based on the performance, comfort, and road manners of the cars we buy.

So a great-performing car like the VW Golf may be a service nightmare. And a routine, uninspiring appliance like the Toyota Corolla may be quite trouble-free. Though below-average reliability prevents us from recommending a car, it doesn't factor into its road-test results.

TESLA RELIABILITY DOESN'T MATCH ITS HIGH PERFORMANCE

TESLA MOTORS' all-electric Model S sedan got high marks in Consumer Reports' 50-plus tests involving driving dynamics and livability, and it consumed energy at the electric equivalent of 84 miles per gallon (87 MPGe in the P85D trim). It's the best-performing car we've ever tested.

But its predicted reliability is another matter.

We received about 1,400 survey responses from Model S owners who chronicled an array of detailed and complicated maladies. From that data, we forecast that owning a Tesla is likely to involve a worse-than-average overall rate.

The main problem areas are the drivetrain, power equipment, charging equipment, giant iPad-like center console, and body and sunroof squeaks, rattles, and leaks.

Is Tesla's newfangled EV technology causing the reliability issues? The Nissan Leaf EV has been above average in reliability for several years; it's average this year. But the Tesla is a much higher-performance and higher-tech vehicle, with more than double the driving range of the Leaf.

The Tesla also wasn't the only high-performance vehicle that fell below average in reliability. Others include the BMW X5 and 5 Series, and the Chevrolet Corvette.

When automakers roll out new technology, be it infotainment, transmissions, or engine variations, it often has a deleterious effect on vehicle reliability. Tesla is not only the poster child for a new type of high-performance, high-mileage EV, but it also has been adding complex new variations as assembly-line updates, such as all-wheel drive this year. So it's not surprising to see problems continue to crop up.

Despite those concerns, our data show that Tesla owner satisfaction is still very high: 97 percent of owners said they would definitely buy their car again. It appears that Tesla has been responsive to replacing faulty motors, differentials, brakes, and infotainment systems, all with a minimum of fuss to owners.

When asked for a comment, a Tesla spokesperson said in an email: "Close communication with our customers enables Tesla to receive input, proactively address issues, and quickly fix problems. Model S over-the-air software updates allow Tesla to diagnose and fix most bugs without the need to come in for service. In instances when hardware needs to be fixed, we keep the customer's convenience and satisfaction top of mind."

The real problem may be down the road, when Tesla migrates its technology from the $127,000 P85D down to the $35,000 Model 3, which it says will be launched in about two years.

It's one thing to have a quirky, problematic car that sells 20,000 units per year to wealthy people who probably own at least one backup vehicle. It's quite another when Tesla scales up to its 2020 projection of 200,000 U.S. Model 3 buyers, who may not have the luxury of being so forgiving.

LEARN

For more on predicted auto reliability, be sure to go to **ConsumerReports.org/reliability**

HOW THE BRANDS STACK UP

THIS TABLE SHOWS how the industry ranks, based on the average predicted-reliability scores of each carmaker's models. We list whether the brand's rank this year went up or down in comparison with the 2014 survey, and which vehicles were the most reliable and least reliable within the product line. The "reliable" range for brands is an average score between -20 and 20. To be included in this list, a brand needed to have sufficient responses from our survey for us to rate at least two models. That led us to exclude Jaguar, Land Rover, Mitsubishi, Scion, Smart, and Tesla. "NA" means a vehicle wasn't included in the 2014 chart; "—" means the vehicle's position was unchanged for 2015.

2016 New-Car Predicted Reliability

2016 RANK	BRAND	NUMBER OF MODELS	AVERAGE SCORE	CHANGE IN RANK FROM LAST YEAR	BEST MODEL	WORST MODEL
MOST RELIABLE						
1	Lexus	7	64%	—	NX	IS
2	Toyota	12	56	—	Prius C	Sienna
3	Audi	8	41	↑2	Q3	A3
4	Mazda	4	35	↓1	3	6
5	Subaru	7	28	↑2	Impreza	WRX/STi
6	Kia	6	27	↑4	Sorento	Rio
7	Buick	5	27	↓1	Encore	LaCrosse
RELIABLE						
8	Honda	4	13	↓4	Accord	CR-V
9	Hyundai	10	6	↑4	Accent	Genesis Coupe
10	Mini	2	1	NA	Cooper	Countryman
11	BMW	7	0	↑3	2 Series	i3
12	Volvo	4	-3	—	S60	V60
13	Volkswagen	8	-7	↑4	CC	Beetle
14	Porsche	5	-8	↓5	911	Cayman
15	Nissan	9	-18	↑1	Murano	Pathfinder
LEAST RELIABLE						
16	Lincoln	3	-27	↓1	MKS	MKC
17	Ford	13	-28	↑6	Expedition	Fiesta
18	Acura	4	-28	↓7	MDX	TLX
19	GMC	8	-46	—	Terrain	Yukon XL
20	Chevrolet	11	-48	↑1	Equinox	Corvette
21	Mercedes-Benz	6	-49	↑3	M-Class	GL-Class
22	Chrysler	3	-49	—	Town & Country	300
23	Dodge	6	-52	↑2	Durango	Challenger
24	Infiniti	3	-55	↓4	Q70	Infiniti QX60
25	Cadillac	5	-91	↓7	SRX	Escalade
26	Ram	2	-95	—	1500	2500
27	Jeep	4	-97	—	Wrangler	Cherokee
28	Fiat	2	-177	—	500	500L

Big Gainers, Bigger Losers

BRANDS THAT GAINED THE MOST
Ford +6
Kia +4
Hyundai +4
Volkswagen +4

Though the Ford brand remained in the lower half of the standings, it did move up six places from last year's survey, buoyed by good first-year scores for the redesigned F-150 pickup and Expedition SUV. Nine of the 13 Fords we scored were average or better. Kia and Hyundai moved up four spots, placing among the top 10 brands. Volkswagen also moved up four steps, to 13th place. Most VWs showed average reliability, but the redesigned Golf had a bad first year.

MODELS THAT GAINED THE MOST
Volkswagen CC
Ford C-Max
Mini Countryman
Scion FR-S/Subaru BRZ
Chrysler Town & Country/ Dodge Grand Caravan

The stylish CC climbed from the depths to become VW's only vehicle with above-average reliability. Ford's C-Max hybrid had a terrible first couple of years but has now improved to average. Mini's mini-SUV Countryman earned an average score after years in the doldrums. The substantially similar FR-S and BRZ sports cars were unusually troublesome for either a Toyota or a Subaru, but both are now average. The long-running Chrysler and Dodge minivans scraped up an average reliability score for the first time in many years.

BRANDS THAT FELL THE FURTHEST
Acura -7
Cadillac -7
Porsche -5

Usually reliable Acura has slipped badly, largely because of transmission and in-car electronics problems in its newest sedans, the RLX and TLX. Cadillac dropped to near the bottom, beset with infotainment and build-quality problems in its newest vehicles. Porsche dropped from ninth to 14th place because of a declining score for the Cayman and a below-average debut for the Macan.

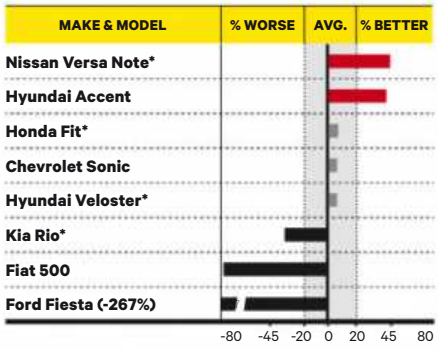
MODELS THAT FELL THE FURTHEST
Acura RLX
Chevrolet Corvette
Dodge Challenger
Kia Rio

Acura's flagship RLX and the sporty Corvette and Challenger dropped from last year's average reliability to far below average. Kia's only unreliable car, the Rio, fell from above average to below average.



Nissan Versa Note

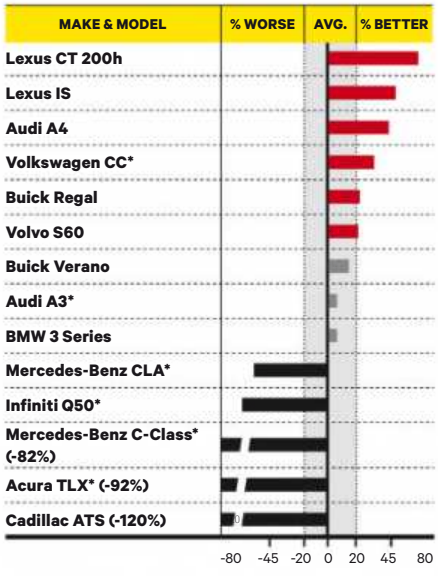
Subcompact Cars





Lexus CT 200h

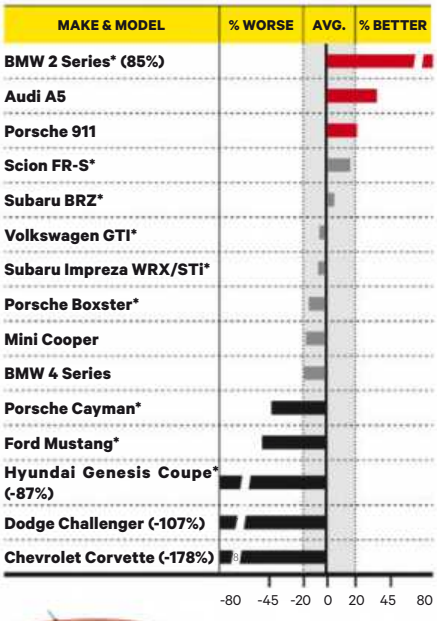
Luxury Compact Cars





BMW 2 Series

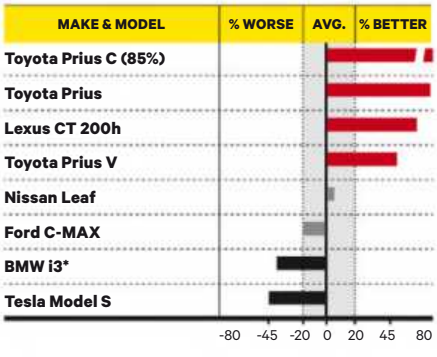
Sporty Cars/Coupes-Convertibles





Toyota Prius C

Hybrid/Electric Cars



How to Use the Charts

Our 2015 auto survey, conducted last spring, gathered information from Consumer Reports subscribers who collectively owned or leased more than 740,000 vehicles. This year, we used online questionnaires exclusively instead of our usual mix of electronic and paper ballots from subscribers. That shrank our respondent pool, but the Internet-only survey allowed us to ask more detailed questions on their experience.

The survey, the largest of its kind, poses questions about 17 trouble areas covering all of a car's substantial components and systems. Respondents identified problems they consider serious by reason of safety, failure, cost, or time out of service in the preceding 12 months. Even a minor issue could count as serious if it meant an unscheduled trip to the dealership.

The scores here show whether a new vehicle is expected to have a trouble rate that's better or worse than the average.

The predictions are based on the frequency of problems for each car for the past three model years, provided the vehicle didn't change significantly in that time. If the model was brand new or redesigned, predictions may be based on a single model year's data; those are marked with an asterisk (*).

The charts' vertical zero line represents the average for all cars. An "average" Rating goes to cars scoring within 20 percentage points of either side of that line. A bar with a break indicates a score so high or so low that it fell outside the range of the chart.

This year's charts group all versions of a model under a single model name, regardless of trim and powertrain type.



Subaru Impreza

Compact Cars

MAKE & MODEL	% WORSE	AVG.	% BETTER
Subaru Impreza			
Toyota Corolla			
Mazda 3			
Hyundai Elantra			
Kia Soul			
Kia Forte*			
Volkswagen Jetta			
Volkswagen Golf*			
Volkswagen Beetle*			
Nissan Sentra			
Dodge Dart (-81%)			
Ford Focus (-118%)			
Fiat 500L* (-276%)			

-80 -45 -20 0 20 45 80



Toyota Camry

Midsized Cars

MAKE & MODEL	% WORSE	AVG.	% BETTER
Toyota Camry			
Honda Accord			
Mazda 6			
Hyundai Sonata*			
Subaru Legacy*			
Ford Fusion			
Volkswagen Passat			
Nissan Altima			
Chrysler 200*			

-80 -45 -20 0 20 45 80



Toyota Avalon

Large Cars

MAKE & MODEL	% WORSE	AVG.	% BETTER
Toyota Avalon			
Hyundai Azera			
Kia Cadenza*			
Buick LaCrosse			
Ford Taurus			
Chevrolet Impala			
Dodge Charger			
Chrysler 300 (-99%)			

-80 -45 -20 0 20 45 80



Lexus GS

Luxury Large Cars

MAKE & MODEL	% WORSE	AVG.	% BETTER
Lexus GS			
Lexus LS			
Lincoln MKS*			
Hyundai Equus*			
Tesla Model S			
Mercedes-Benz S-Class			

-80 -45 -20 0 20 45 80



Lexus ES

Luxury Midsized Cars

MAKE & MODEL	% WORSE	AVG.	% BETTER
Lexus ES			
Audi A7			
Audi A6			
Infiniti Q70*			
Mercedes-Benz E-Class			
Lincoln MKZ			
Hyundai Genesis*			
Cadillac CTS*			
BMW 5 Series			
Cadillac XTS*			
Acura RLX*			

-80 -45 -20 0 20 45 80



Kia Sportage

Small SUVs

MAKE & MODEL	% WORSE	AVG.	% BETTER
Kia Sportage*			
Toyota RAV4			
Subaru XV Crosstrek			
Subaru Forester			
Mazda CX-5			
Nissan Rogue			
Volkswagen Tiguan			
Honda CR-V*			
Nissan Juke*			
Ford Escape			
Jeep Patriot*			
Jeep Cherokee (-250%)			

-80 -45 -20 0 20 45 80

OWNERS SPEAK OUT

OUR 2015 RELIABILITY SURVEY allowed car owners to tell us, in their own (often angry) words, about service problems they had experienced in the past year. The following comments are a verbatim sampling of what disappointed owners regarding five of the most trouble-prone cars in our annual survey.

FIAT 500L
- Transmission will not shift gears.
- (Transmission) would not go into gear; stopped on busy road.
- Car towed five times due to dead battery.
- Car stopped running ... engineers told (dealer) to replace the engine.
- Tie rod broke.

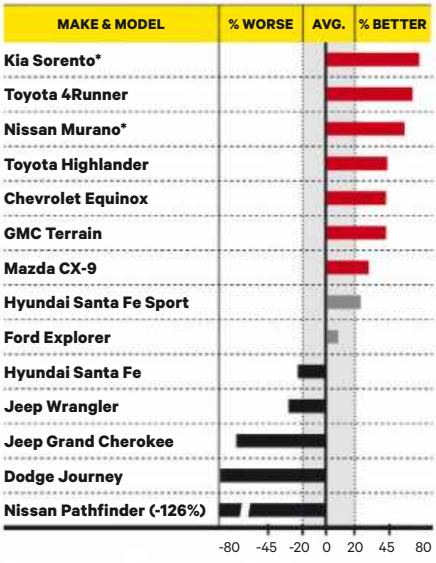
FORD FIESTA
- Transmission rebuilt twice already.
- Rough chattering shifts.
- Fuel pump (failure) happened twice now; melted the first time.
- Driver's side seat belt no longer retracts properly.
- Low-beam light replaced.
- Car seemed to overheat for no reason and was jerky and spastic.
- The trunk has a water leak. It's always full of water.
- Side mirror pops off with very slight pressure.

JEEP CHEROKEE
- Transmission needed numerous software patches.
- Vehicle constantly searching for the correct gear.
- Transmission failed twice ... needed to be replaced.
- Key could not be removed from ignition.



Kia Sorento

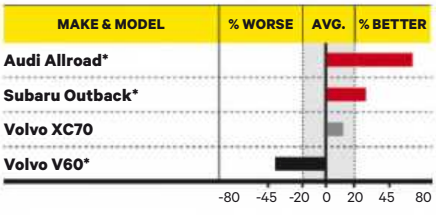
Midsized SUVs





Audi Allroad

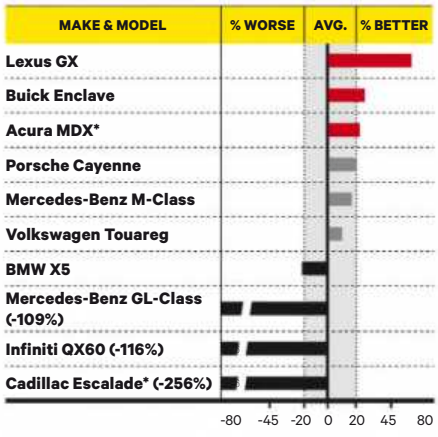
Wagons





Lexus GX

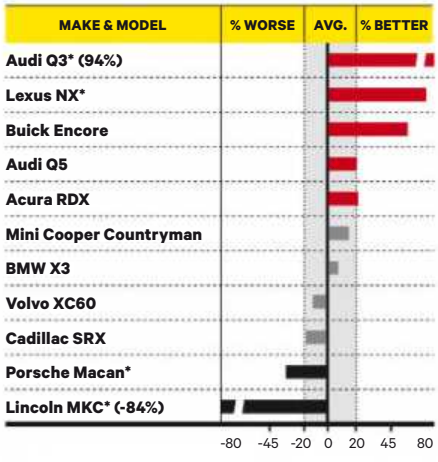
Luxury Midsized/Large SUVs





Audi Q3

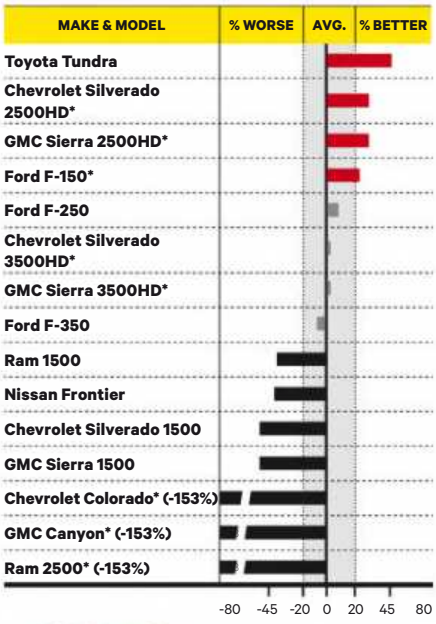
Luxury Compact SUVs





Toyota Tundra

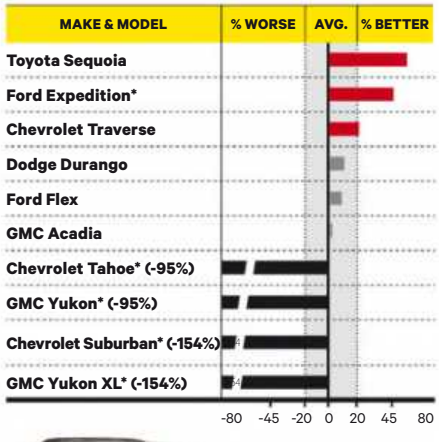
Pickup Trucks





Toyota Sequoia

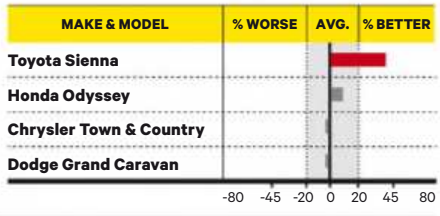
Large SUVs





Toyota Sienna

Minivans



- Squeaking sound ... dealer cannot find the cause.
- (Tire pressure) warning light constantly on and off.
- Push button start would not work.
- The whole Uconnect (infotainment system) just died.

NISSAN PATHFINDER

- Airbag-off warning light illuminates frequently when passenger seat is occupied.
- Weatherstripping seal on the roof became dislodged.
- Transmission would hesitate or jerk.
- CVT would violently shake the entire car.
- Judder as if tranny is falling out.

CHEVROLET SUBURBAN/GMC YUKON XL

- Would not transfer out of two-wheel drive.
- Safety-alert driver's seat does not vibrate ... dealer serviced 4 times, still not working.
- Nav and telephone does not work.
- Needed new GPS antenna.
- Power folding mirrors are scratching the paint.
- Plastic panels on doors come loose.
- In the shop several times due to front wheel shimmy.

20 LEAST RELIABLE NEW CARS

Although Detroit steel makes up most of the list, some surprises appear from Japan and Europe



1
FIAT 500L*
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, transmission, power equipment



2
FORD FIESTA
Top problem areas:
Transmission, noise and leaks



3
CADILLAC ESCALADE*
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, drive system, transmission



4
JEEP CHEROKEE
Top problem areas:
Transmission, in-car electronics, drive system



5
CHEVROLET CORVETTE
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, engine, climate system



6
CHEVROLET SUBURBAN/ GMC YUKON XL*
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, drive system, power equipment



7
RAM 2500*
Top problem areas:
Fuel system, power equipment, in-car electronics



8
CHEVROLET COLORADO/ GMC CANYON*
Top problem areas:
in-car electronics, climate system, transmission



9
NISSAN PATHFINDER
Top problem areas:
Transmission, power equipment, in-car electronics



10
CADILLAC ATS
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, engine, climate system



11
FORD FOCUS
Top problem areas:
Transmission, in-car electronics, drive system



12
INFINITI QX60
Top problem areas:
Transmission, paint and trim, noise and leaks



13
MERCEDES-BENZ GL-CLASS
Top problem areas:
Brakes, in-car electronics, power equipment



14
DODGE CHALLENGER
Top problem areas:
Transmission, engine, noise and leaks



15
CHRYSLER 300
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, transmission, climate system



16
CHEVROLET TAHOE/ GMC YUKON*
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, power equipment, noise and leaks



17
ACURA TLX*
Top problem areas:
Transmission, in-car electronics



18
HYUNDAI GENESIS COUPE
Top problem areas:
Transmission, noise and leaks



19
LINCOLN MKC*
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, drive system, power equipment



20
MERCEDES-BENZ C-CLASS*
Top problem areas:
In-car electronics, drive system, steering/suspension

For models with an *, data was from only one model year.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

CAR STRATEGIST

Who You Gonna Call?

From apps to insurers, where to get help when you break down

You get a flat tire in the middle of nowhere, or the radiator just went Old Faithful. You're stuck.

When it comes to roadside assistance, the American Automobile Association claims to be North America's largest and best-known provider. But there are options in addition to AAA that you should consider.

If your situation simply involves getting roadside help, AAA has its limitations. Like other providers, its breakdown services can be subcontracted to local providers, and customer service and towing distances can vary.

Basic membership prices are different from state to state (generally from $48 to $96 per year). AAA offers nationwide service, but there's a cap on the number of yearly service calls. And specialized services, such as RV towing, come at an additional cost or may not be available at all.

So consider your options before you're stranded on the side of a barren interstate. First, find out whether your car is still under the manufacturer's warranty. Roadside assistance–with jump-starting, lockout service, and towing–may already be part of your coverage at no additional cost. And summoning assistance–such as with OnStar- or AcuraLink-equipped vehicles–is as simple as pushing a button. Of course, cars are least likely to break down while under warranty.

Next, consider other companies that offer services with a specific focus. Eco-friendly Better World Club (betterworldclub.com) uses members' premiums to offset carbon emissions from vehicles. It also provides discounts for owners of hybrids. Coach-Net (coach-net.com) gears its programs to RVs; US Rider (usrider.org) offers coverage for horse transport, including trailer service and veterinary referrals.

A new app-based provider, Urgent.ly, offers on-demand, pay-per-use services with no membership required. But at $75 for a basic service call and $99 for towing up to 10 miles, a single call can be more expensive than a full year of AAA membership. (Consumer Reports has not evaluated AAA or any of those alternative providers.)

Some auto-insurance providers also offer roadside-assistance coverage. The programs cover the car rather than the member, so they're a good choice for older vehicles shared by several family members. If you're considering that option, ask your insurance provider whether making multiple service calls will affect your insurance premiums.

Although prices can be lower than AAA, those programs generally provide only basic roadside assistance.

Bear in mind, too, that those alternative plans also use independent service providers, so the quality of service may vary. Some offer their own discount programs, but it's hard to match the breadth of AAA's offerings, which have added benefits such as travel-planning assistance, DMV services, and hotel discounts.

If you travel frequently, AAA's discount program alone could be worth the cost of membership. Even if you find a provider or program better for your needs, you may want to consider keeping your AAA membership just for the discounts, with its roadside assistance as a backup.

At the extreme end of the solutions scale, do-it-yourself roadside assistance is now easier than ever. Lightweight battery jump-boxes take the hassle out of jump-starting a car. Many modern vehicles are equipped with tire sealant and an air compressor rather than a spare and jack–although a sealant kit won't help you if a tire's sidewall, rather than the tread, is damaged.

But sometimes a rudimentary repair kit and a little elbow grease can get you on your way in less time than it would take for a tow truck to show up.

Still, the most common breakdowns are caused by dead batteries, flat tires, lockouts, and running out of fuel. If you decide to be your own roadside-assistance provider, be sure you always have a cell phone and charger. And remember that for bigger breakdowns requiring a tow, you'll have to pay out of pocket.

WRITE

Have a problem with your mechanic or dealership? Something puzzling you about your car? Contact CR's Car Strategist at carstrategist@cr.consumer.org

Questions to Ask Before Signing Up

- Is there a limit on the number of service calls I can make in a year?
- Is coverage provided in all 50 states?
- What distance is covered for towing? And what is the per-mile cost beyond that limit?
- Can I always get a flatbed tow truck?
- Do you offer coverage for trailers? Dual-rear-wheel pickups? Large SUVs?
- For insurance programs: Will making service calls affect my premiums?

The Antidote for the Common Minivan

AT ONE TIME, driving a Honda Pilot meant that driving dynamics, family friendliness, and powertrain refinement were more important to you than the macho, trucklike SUV look. The Pilot was a natural next step for Honda CR-V and Accord owners with growing families who didn't want a minivan. But something went awry in the late-2000s. Honda changed tack, making the Pilot more trucky and cheap-feeling. Other manufacturers started making a better Honda than Honda. With the 2016 redesign, Honda takes a swing at a softer, more carlike Pilot.





Honda Pilot

80

BUILT PROPERLY, AN SUV performs the family-hauling duties of a minivan with added machismo, and without being a poster child for a "Mom-mobile."

In that respect, the redesigned Pilot does a commendable minivan impression with its flexible seating for eight; a roomy, versatile, and feature-filled interior; and easy access to all three seating rows. But while it addresses many of the previous generation's flaws, the new Pilot is still lost in the fog.

When it comes to handling, this SUV has no connection with the nimble Hondas of the past. On open roads, the Pilot maneuvers like an apartment building on wheels. Its cumbersome cornering makes the Pilot feel reluctant to turn, and the vague steering chips away at your confidence. Nobody expects sports car handling from an SUV, but the Pilot is inferior to Honda's hulking Odyssey minivan—whether meandering down the road or darting around obstacles. Plus, the Pilot's mediocre braking on wet roads trails most competitors.

The flip side to the Pilot's ungainly handling is a comfortable ride. This SUV's suspension smooths out bumps with composure. Some road imperfections will rock the Pilot from side to side, but overall a trip in the Pilot is uneventful. Honda loaded up on the sound-deadening materials, resulting in a quiet cabin.

The 3.5-liter V6 is a gem, smoothly and promptly delivering power throughout its rev range. Drivers are never left feeling in a dead zone of acceleration, with the standard six-speed automatic smoothly swapping gears. Our all-wheel-drive Pilot averaged 20 mpg overall in tests—on par with other vehicles in the segment. Front-drive Pilots are likely to do 1 or 2 mpg better.

The upmarket Touring and Elite trim levels are saddled with a nine-speed gearbox that's neither smooth nor responsive, and it uses an infuriating and unintuitive push-button shifter. Shoppers should stick with the six-speed.

Interior materials and details are certainly improved, with hard, cheap plastics exiled to the recycling bin. All sizes of drivers found plenty of room, with good access to the pedals, adjustable steering wheel, and dashboard controls. Windows are big and roof pillars are thin, giving a commanding all-around view from the helm.



SENSIBLE SEATS The second-row seats fold and slide forward with the touch of a button.

TESTED VEHICLE	
HIGHS	Roomy interior, visibility, access, smooth powertrain, crash-test results, available safety gear
LOWS	Clumsy handling, infuriating touch-screen radio, blind-spot monitor only on Elite trim, annoying push-button shifter on high-end versions
POWERTRAIN	280-hp, 3.5-liter V6; six-speed automatic; all-wheel drive
FUEL	20 mpg
PRICE	$30,875-$47,300

Though the front seats are well-padded and supportive, the lumbar adjusts only for pressure, not height. And some drivers felt that the front of the seat cushion didn't lower enough.

The second row is roomy, and the seats can slide fore/aft to give space to third-row occupants. The rearmost seats are best left for kids.

Gauges are easy to read, and the climate controls are super-clear. But like every contemporary Honda, drivers must suffer with a convoluted touch-screen infotainment system. Fonts and buttons are large, but finding menus, changing the volume or radio station, or adjusting settings is frustrating. Consider the steering-wheel controls your co-pilot to handle tasks.

Advanced crash-prevention tech is available across the lineup, but only the top-level Elite gets blind-spot detection. In its place on most trims is the LaneWatch camera, but studying the display screen takes your attention off the road.

Honda faithful will recognize this Pilot as an Odyssey in weekend warrior packaging but will still wonder where the brand's cherished attributes—such as intuitive controls and agile handling—have gone.

Not-Quite-Maximum Impact

PRODUCING AN HONEST sports sedan has eluded Nissan for the last two decades. Unfortunately, the new Maxima still falls short of that promise. Although touted as a sporty four-door, the Maxima is nothing of the sort. Is it at least a convincingly luxurious large sedan? Sadly, the new Nissan falters as a haven of opulence as well. Throw in a $42,000 price tag for the Platinum version we tested and—despite some high points—the Maxima becomes a questionable purchase proposition.

Nissan Maxima

81

WE HAD HIGH HOPES for Nissan's new flagship, thinking that maybe this time the Japanese automaker would get it right. There's sleek styling. A potent engine. It looked promising. But despite Nissan's ambitions, the Maxima doesn't tick enough boxes.

Granted, it's quick. The 3.5-liter V6 eagerly unleashes every one of its 300 horses, dashing from 0 to 60 mph in just 6.5 seconds while still returning a commendable 25 mpg overall—impressive considering that it doesn't use a hybrid system and isn't a diesel. The trade-off is that it recommends premium fuel.

But those numbers don't tell the whole story. Every time you need a little extra oomph from the powertrain—say, when merging on a busy highway—the standard continuously variable transmission (CVT) produces a lot of angst-inducing engine noise and feels disconnected to the whole acceleration experience. The transmission may be smooth around town, but it's not particularly kind to your ears and it thwarts any sense of driving pleasure. Every tester complained that the CVT neutered a great engine backed with a seemingly endless well of horsepower.

For all of its "four-door sports car" sloganeering, the Maxima's handling is rather mundane and not befitting a car with such a sporty pretense. The steering provides hardly any feedback, and during low-speed parking maneuvers, the effort required from the driver suddenly becomes quite hefty for no apparent reason. It's as if the software was programmed backward.

The Maxima's ride was also a letdown, with some bumps unduly punching through. And it tended to produce unsettling motions that caused some passengers to feel seasick.

Inside, the cabin remains quiet. But the driving position is cramped and confining. Head room is tight, and your right leg and knee will probably be snugged up against the side of the intrusive center console (at least it's padded). And the old-style foot-operated parking brake steals valuable real estate from your left shin.

Visibility is hurt by narrow windows, sharply sloped front windshield pillars, and a high parcel shelf behind the rear seats. Considering that seeing out of the Maxima is akin to peering out of a cave, it's disappointing that lane-departure warning isn't offered. Fortunately, a backup camera is standard, and a surround-view system is optional.

Those seated in back have scant space, with limited head and leg room and tiny toe room under the front seats. Our testers kept wondering how a car so big outside could feel so small inside.

The controls are a bright spot—incorporating high-tech connectivity and a long list of features into an approachable, easy-to-understand design. Plus, Nissan's new touch-screen infotainment system is one of the best in the industry. The fit and finish is elegant; the diamond-quilted stitching on the seats of high-end models is a snazzy touch.

Putting the Maxima in perspective, it's neither a viable alternative to a large, cosseting family sedan such as the Chevrolet Impala or Toyota Avalon nor a genuine competitor to an enthusiastic sports sedan like a BMW 3 Series. That leaves the Maxima in a peculiar limbo.



TESTED VEHICLE	
HIGHS	Acceleration, fuel economy, controls, fit and finish
LOWS	Ride, steering, engine noise, access, snug driving position, visibility, rear-seat room
POWERTRAIN	300-hp, 3.5-liter V6 engine; continuously-variable transmission; front-wheel drive
FUEL	25 mpg
PRICE	$33,235-$40,685



CLEAR CONNECTIVITY The infotainment system has one of the better user interfaces.



ANGST INDUCER The CVT detracts from enjoying the Maxima's lusty engine.



Ratings: Midsized SUVs and Large Cars to Carry a Crowd

Scores in context: Recommended models did well in the overall road-test score and had average or better predicted reliability. They also performed adequately in government or insurance-industry crash tests, if tested. For full Ratings, available to online subscribers, go to ConsumerReports.org.

☑ Recommended

Better ◀ ● ◓ ○ ◒ ● ▶ Worse

Recommended	Rank	MAKE & MODEL	PRICE	RELIABILITY	SCORE	TEST RESULTS									
			As Tested	Predicted	Road Test	Overall MPG	Acceleration 0-60 MPH, Sec.	Dry Braking 60-0 MPH, Ft.	AM Speed, MPH	Routine Handling	Ride/Noise	Driving Position	Seat Comfort Front/Rear	Controls	Cargo Volume, Cu. Ft./ Luggage, Suitcases +Duffels
3-ROW MIDSIZED SUVs															
☑	1	**Kia Sorento** EX (V6)	$37,915	●	**84**	21	7.4	131	49.5	◓	◓/◓	◓	◓/◓	●	37.5
☑	2	**Toyota Highlander** XLE (V6)	$38,941	●	**84**	20	7.5	134	50.5	○	◓/◓	◓	●/◓	◓	40.5
☑	3	**Dodge Durango** Limited (V6)	$43,525	○	**83**	18	8.3	134	48.0	○	◓/●	◓	●/◓	●	44.0
	4	**Hyundai Santa Fe** GLS (V6)	$36,290	◒	**81**	20	7.6	133	51.0	○	◓/◓	◓	◓/●	●	40.5
	5	**Honda Pilot** EX-L	$39,585	New	**80**	20	7.5	136	49.5	○	◓/◓	◓	◓/●	○	48.0
☑	6	**Chevrolet Traverse** LT	$39,920	◓	**77**	16	7.9	141	50.0	◓	◓/◓	◓	◓/◓	◓	48.5
	7	**Mazda CX-9** Grand Touring	$38,615	◓	**77**	16	8.2	137	48.5	◓	◓/◓	◓	◓/◓	◓	37.5
	8	**Nissan Pathfinder** SL	$40,470	●	**72**	18	7.7	137	47.0	◒	◓/◓	◓	◓/◓	●	39.5
	9	**Ford Explorer** XLT (V6)	$39,275	○	**67**	18	7.9	135	49.5	○	◓/◓	○	◓/◓	◒	42.0
	10	**Dodge Journey** Limited (V6)	$36,975	●	**64**	16	8.1	139	50.0	○	◓/◓	○	◓/◓	◓	37.0

Why certain models are not recommended. The Honda Pilot is too new for us to have reliability data. The Ford Explorer scored too low to recommend. The Dodge Journey, Hyundai Santa Fe, and Nissan Pathfinder have much below average reliability. The Mazda CX-9 scored a Poor in the IIHS small overlap crash-test.

Recommended	Rank	MAKE & MODEL	PRICE	RELIABILITY	SCORE	TEST RESULTS									
			As Tested	Predicted	Road Test	Overall MPG	Acceleration 0-60 MPH, Sec.	Dry Braking 60-0 MPH, Ft.	AM Speed, MPH	Routine Handling	Ride/Noise	Driving Position	Seat Comfort Front/Rear	Controls	Cargo Volume, Cu. Ft./ Luggage, Suitcases +Duffels
LARGE CARS															
☑	1	**Chevrolet Impala** 2LTZ (3.6)	$39,110	○	**91**	22	6.9	130	54.0	◓	●/◓	◓	●/◓	◓	4+2
	2	**Dodge Charger** R/T Plus (V8)	$40,375	●	**85**	20	6.1	128	50.5	◓	◓/●	◓	●/◓	●	2+3
☑	3	**Lincoln MKZ** 2.0 EcoBoost	$41,365	○	**84**	23	7.4	124	53.0	●	●/●	○	●/○	●	3+2
	4	**Chrysler 300** Limited (V6)	$38,335	●	**83**	22	7.4	137	50.0	◓	◓/●	◓	●/●	◓	3+1
☑	5	**Kia Cadenza**	$39,030	◓	**83**	22	7.2	132	51.5	○	◓/◓	◓	◓/◓	●	3+2
	6	**Nissan Maxima** Platinum	$41,995	New	**81**	25	6.5	132	53.0	◓	○/◓	○	●/○	●	3+0
☑	7	**Toyota Avalon** Limited (V6)*	$40,670	◓	**81**	24	7.0	132	53.5	○	○/◓	◓	●/◓	◓	3+2
☑	8	**Hyundai Azera**	$37,185	◓	**80**	23	7.2	132	51.5	○	◓/◓	◓	●/●	◓	3+2
☑	9	**Lexus ES** 350	$43,702	●	**78**	25	6.7	139	51.5	○	◓/●	◓	●/◓	○	3+2
☑	10	**Buick LaCrosse** Premium I (V6)	$37,555	○	**76**	20	7.2	137	52.5	◓	◓/◓	○	●/◓	◓	3+1
	11	**Ford Taurus** Limited (3.5, V6)	$37,885	○	**68**	21	7.2	135	50.0	○	◓/◓	○	◓/◓	●	4+2

Why certain models are not recommended. The Nissan Maxima is too new for us to have reliability data. The Chrysler 300 and Dodge Charger have much below average reliability. The Ford Taurus scored too low to recommend.

*For 2016, the Toyota Avalon gets suspension tweaks to improve the ride. We will retest it soon.

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1215AFR

INDEX

A

- Air conditioners ... Jul 15, 18
- Airfares ... Jun 15, 31
- Airline baggage restrictions ... Jun 15, 31
- American-made products ... Jul 15, 13; Jul 15, 24
- Antibiotics ... Dec 15, 11
- Arsenic in rice ... Jan 15, 41
- ATV safety regulations ... Feb 15, 8
- Audio equipment ... May 15, 21
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 40

AUTOMOBILE RATINGS:

- Acura TLX ... Feb 15, 54
- Audi Q3 ... May 15, 54
- BMW 3 Series ... Feb 15, 54
- BMW X3 ... Jan 15, 52
- Cadillac Escalade ... Jul 15, 55
- Chevrolet Colorado ... Aug 15, 57
- Chevrolet Trax ... Oct 15, 59
- Dodge Challenger ... Aug 15, 58
- Ford Edge ... Nov 15, 62
- Ford F-150 ... Aug 15, 56
- Ford Mustang ... Aug 15, 58
- Ford Transit Connect ... Mar 15, 54
- Honda CR-V ... May 15, 54
- Honda Fit ... Mar 15, 54
- Honda HR-V ... Oct 15, 58
- Honda Pilot ... Dec 15, 70
- Jeep Renegade ... Oct 15, 59
- Kia Sorento ... Jul 15, 55
- Land Rover Discovery Sport ... Nov 15, 62
- Lexus NX ... Sep 15, 58
- Lincoln MKC ... Jan 15, 52
- Lincoln Navigator ... Jul 15, 55
- Mercedes-Benz C300 ... Feb 15, 54
- Mercedes-Benz GLA250 ... May 15, 54
- Nissan Maxima ... Dec 15, 71
- Nissan Murano ... Jul 15, 55
- Porsche Macan S ... Jan 15, 52
- Subaru Outback ... Mar 15, 54
- Volkswagen Golf ... Mar 15, 54
- Volvo V60 Cross Country ... Sep 15, 59

AUTOMOBILES & AUTO EQUIPMENT

- 200,000-mile cars ... Jun 15, 52
  - repair costs ... Jun 15, 54
- American revival ... Apr 15, 13
- American-made ... Jul 15, 52
- backup cameras ... Dec 15, 6
- batteries, Duralast Platinum ... Mar 15, 58
- best & worst for 2015 ... Apr 15, 14; Oct 15, 53
- best value new cars for 2015 ... Feb 15, 50
- bike racks, SeaSucker Talon ... Mar 15, 58
- BMW i3 ... Jun 15, 59
- BMW i8 ... Jan 15, 55
- body panels, aluminum ... Mar 15, 59
- buy or not? ... Apr 15, 19
- Chevrolet Camaro 2016 redesign ... Aug 15, 59
- child safety seats ... Sep 15, 55
- coming in 2015 ... Apr 15, 30
- deals, summer ... Aug 15, 64
- driving, winter ... Nov 15, 52
- engines, direct-injection ... Feb 15, 59
- family vehicles ... Sep 15, 52
- Ford F-150 ... Jan 15, 55
- Ford Mustang ... Jan 15, 56
- fuel economy ... Apr 15, 17
- as gifts ... Dec 15, 46
- green, costs ... Apr 15, 16
- hacking ... Jun 15, 60
- headlights
  - cleaning, toothpaste for ... May 15, 11
  - new technology ... Jul 15, 60
- Honda CR-V ... Feb 15, 57
- infotainment systems ... Apr 15, 28
  - Apple CarPlay ... Feb 15, 57
  - Google Android Auto ... Jan 15, 59
- insurance, rate setting ... Sep 15, 28
- keyless-entry systems ... Jan 15, 59
- leasing ... May 15, 58
  - luxury cars ... Feb 15, 58
- Lincoln MKC ... Jan 15, 55
- maintenance
  - rip-offs ... Jan 15, 59
- manufacturers ... Apr 15, 12
- Mazda CX-3 ... Oct 15, 57
- motorcycles, reliability ... May 15, 52
- new for 2016 ... Oct 15, 50
- oil consumption ... Aug 15, 61
- owner satisfaction ... Jan 15, 47
- Porsche Macan S ... Jan 15, 55
- profiles, 2015 ... Apr 15, 31
- Ratings, 2015 ... Apr 15, 66
- recalls & technical service bulletins ... Apr 15, 25; Dec 15, 6
  - handling ... Jan 15, 56
- reliability ... Apr 15, 87; Dec 15, 62
- rental cars, recalls and ... May 15, 60
- safety features ... Apr 15, 22
  - rear seat ... Sep 15, 9
- sedans ... May 15, 60
  - luxury compact ... Jan 15, 55
- service satisfaction survey ... Mar 15, 52
- SUVs
  - luxury ... Jan 15, 52
  - small ... Oct 15, 56
- Tesla Model S P85D ... Oct 15, 60
- tips ... Mar 15, 9
- tires ... Apr 15, 18
  - pressure, cold weather ... Jan 15, 59
  - treadwear ... Nov 15, 57
- top picks for 2015 ... Apr 15, 8
- used cars ... Apr 15, 80
  - under $10,000 ... Jun 15, 56
  - certified preowned ... Jun 15, 55
  - necessary features ... Jun 15, 58
  - reliability ... Apr 15, 62
- Volkswagen Golf ... Feb 15, 57

B–D

- Banks & financial institutions, Walmart ... Jan 15, 24
- Bathroom remodeling ... Sep 15, 38
- Batteries ... Dec 15, 36
  - AA ... Mar 15, 20
- Beef
  - ground, safety ... Oct 15, 26
  - tenderized, safety labeling ... Aug 15, 8
- Bird feeders, protecting from squirrels ... Mar 15, 8
- Blood glucose monitors ... May 15, 48
- Blood pressure monitors ... May 15, 48
- Cabinets, kitchen ... Aug 15, 34
- Cameras, digital ... Jun 15, 49; Nov 15, 9
- Caramel coloring, safety ... Sep 15, 8
- Cash
  - as a gift ... Dec 15, 57
- Charities ... Dec 15, 23
- Chips, snack ... Jun 15, 44
- Cleaning products, labeling ... May 15, 8
  - EPA Safer Choice ... May 15, 7
- Clothes dryers ... Nov 15, 16
  - fire prevention ... Jan 15, 8
- Coffee
- Computers
  - laptops ... Sep 15, 48
  - software, security ... Jul 15, 46
  - tablet ... May 15, 50
- Consumer action
  - advertising, deceptive, YouTube ... Aug 15, 8
  - airline prices ... Oct 15, 9
  - auto loans ... Mar 15, 8
  - cable TV problems ... May 15, 11
    - cost ... Nov 15, 12
  - call blocking ... Jun 15, 8
  - cell phones
    - radiation ... Nov 15, 10
    - third-party fees ... Mar 15, 8
  - Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Congressional weakening of ... Oct 15, 9
  - consumer rights ... Nov 15, 8
  - Consumers Union ... Mar 15, 8
  - credit reports ... Mar 15, 8; Nov 15, 9
  - credit scores, medical bills and ... Jan 15, 8
  - detergent pod safety ... Jun 15, 8
  - financial adviser legislation ... Jul 15, 8
  - food safety ... May 15, 11
  - meat and antibiotics ... Jul 15, 8
  - medical bills, protesting ... Aug 15, 8; Nov 15, 46
  - National Highway Traffic Safety Administration funding ... Sep 15, 9
  - nicotine, liquid, childproof packaging ... Jan 15, 8
  - reverse mortgages ... Sep 15, 9
  - unfair lending practices ... Jul 15, 8
  - window coverings, child safety ... Jan 15, 8
- Consumer heroism
  - cable rates, seniors protesting ... Jan 15, 8
  - chicken, Perdue, growing conditions ... Mar 15, 8
  - medical bill errors ... Jun 15, 8
  - Medicare Fraud Strike Force ... Oct 15, 8
  - robocalls ... Aug 15, 8
- Consumer victories, telecommunications, Lifeline phone discounts ... Sep 15, 9
- Consumers Union Safe Patient Project ... Oct 15, 9
- Cooktops ... Aug 15, 40
- Counterfeit products ... Jul 15, 32
- Countertops ... Dec 15, 11
  - bathroom ... Sep 15, 38
  - kitchen ... Aug 15, 32
- Credit cards
  - benefits of ... Aug 15, 13
  - rewards ... Dec 15, 26
  - security ... Jul 15, 21
- Credit scores ... Jan 15, 12
- CT scans, unnecessary ... Mar 15, 36
- Currency, electronic, bitcoin ... May 15, 12
- Customer service ... Sep 15, 10
- Deals, broken ... Jun 15, 9
- Dishwashers ... Aug 15, 46
- Drugs
  - anti-aging ... Aug 15, 16
  - antibiotics, misuse ... Aug 15, 20
  - Mucinex Fast-Max recall ... Jul 15, 21
  - over-the-counter, labeling ... Feb 15, 12
  - prescription ... Nov 15, 9

E–G

- Electronics
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 32
  - shopping for ... Dec 15, 37
- E-mail gripes and tips ... Mar 15, 10
- Energy costs ... Oct 15, 38
  - cutting ... Oct 15, 44
- Energy Star program ... Oct 15, 42
- Everyday products ... Jan 15, 26
- Exercise equipment ... Feb 15, 46
- Fabric care, Downy Wrinkle Releaser Plus ... May 15, 20
- Fast products ... Feb 15, 38
- Financial planners ... Dec 15, 6
- Flooring, kitchen ... Aug 15, 36
- Food
  - fads ... Jun 15, 14
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 28
    - food baskets ... Dec 15, 38
  - GMOs in ... Mar 15, 12
  - irradiation ... Dec 15, 6
  - labeling ... Feb 15, 9
    - dates ... Dec 15, 14
  - produce, pesticide safety ... May 15, 29
- 401(k) plans ... Oct 15, 13
- Furniture, outdoor ... Jun 15, 38
- Garbage disposal odor removal ... May 15, 43
- Generators ... Oct 15, 16
- Gift cards ... Dec 15, 44
- Gift etiquette ... Dec 15, 53
- Gift-wrapping services ... Dec 15, 24
- Gluten-free foods ... Jan 15, 36
- Grills, gas ... Jun 15, 40
  - Brinkmann Patio 810-6230-S, Don't Buy ... Jul 15, 49

H–K

- Headphones ... Oct 15, 24
- Health insurance
  - COBRA and Medicare ... Mar 15, 9
- Heating, patio ... Jun 15, 40
- Helmets, bicycle ... Jun 15, 46
- Herbicide, homemade ... Aug 15, 8
- Home appliances
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 48; Dec 15, 54
- Home improvements ... Mar 15, 22; Mar 15, 34; Nov 15, 13
- Home repairs, financing ... Mar 15, 36
- Home selling mistakes ... Mar 15, 32
- Hospitals
  - infections at ... Sep 15, 22; Oct 15, 5
  - patient respect & safety ... Feb 15, 32
- Humidifiers ... Jan 15, 21
- Insect repellents ... Jul 15, 34
- Insurance ... Dec 15, 11
- Internet
  - Net neutrality rules ... May 15, 11
  - privacy ... Feb 15, 10
  - service ... Aug 15, 48
- Investments, peer-to-peer ... Feb 15, 10
- Irons ... Nov 15, 16
- Juicers ... Jan 15, 43
- Kitchen appliances
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 16
  - shopping for ... Aug 15, 39
- Kitchen remodeling ... Aug 15, 27
  - one-stop shopping ... Aug 15, 30

L–P

- Laundry detergents ... Sep 15, 18
- Lawn care ... May 15, 33
- Lawn mowers & tractors ... May 15, 36
- Leaf blowers ... Nov 15, 13
- Lightbulbs ... Jan 15, 45; Oct 15, 45
- Listeria ... Jun 15, 9
- Loans
  - mortgages
    - Consumer Financial Protection Bureau online tool ... May 15, 11
    - refinancing ... Mar 15, 35
  - peer-to-peer ... Feb 15, 10
  - student ... May 15, 12
- Longevity, savings and ... Aug 15, 10
- Lottery ... Dec 15, 44
- Magazine subscription scams ... Jun 15, 9
- Mattresses ... Nov 14, 52; May 15, 16
- Money tips ... Jan 15, 9
- Outdoor equipment
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 54
- Outdoor remodeling ... Jun 15, 36
- Packaging ... Nov 15, 24
- Paints & stains
  - exterior ... Jun 15, 38
  - interior ... Mar 15, 28
  - labeling claims ... Sep 15, 8
- Pasta ... Dec 15, 13
- Photography, smartphone ... Jul 15, 22
- Portable devices
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 40
- Pricing, unit ... May 15, 7; May 15, 10
- Printers ... Dec 15, 10

R–S

- Radiation ... Nov 15, 7
- Ranges ... Aug 15, 40
- Real estate agents, dirty tricks ... Mar 15, 35
- Recycled wrapping paper ... Dec 15, 25
- Recycling tips ... May 15, 13
- Refrigerators ... Aug 15, 43
  - icemakers, servicing ... Jul 15, 9
- Regifting ... Dec 15, 43
- Roadside assistance ... Dec 15, 69
- Robocalls ... Sep 15, 14
- Scams
  - celebrity "click-bait" ... Mar 15, 21
  - contractor ... May 15, 20
  - home security ... Dec 15, 13
  - phishing by text message ... Oct 15, 12
  - senior-targeted ... Feb 15, 8; Nov 15, 28
  - travel club ... Feb 15, 20
- Shopping
  - online or not? ... Jul 15, 10
- Shrimp ... Jun 15, 16
  - antibiotics in ... Aug 15, 9
- Sinks & faucets
  - bathroom ... Sep 15, 38
  - kitchen ... Aug 15, 35
- Smartphones
  - photo storage ... Dec 15, 10
- Snacks & snacking ... Sep 15, 44
- Snow blowers ... Jan 15, 16
- Snow shovels ... Jan 15, 18
- Solar power ... Oct 15, 40
- Speakers
  - outdoor ... Jun 15, 42
- Stores
  - Bed Bath & Beyond, return policy ... Aug 15, 9
  - return policies ... Dec 15, 58
  - supermarkets ... May 15, 24
- Student discounts ... Oct 15, 10
- Sunscreens ... Jul 15, 38

T

- Taxes
  - health care reform and ... Feb 15, 14
  - last-minute saving tips ... Feb 15, 14
  - preparations ... Feb 15, 14
- Technical support ... Jul 15, 46
- Telephone services, cellular ... Feb 15, 23
  - AT&T data plan throttling ... Feb 15, 8
- Telephones
  - cellular, unlocking ... Jan 15, 9
  - smart ... Nov 14, 54; Feb 15, 28
    - Apple iPhone 6 ... Jul 15, 49
    - navigation apps ... Oct 15, 34
    - Samsung Galaxy S line ... Jul 15, 49
  - for seniors ... Sep 15, 13
- Television ... Aug 15, 48
  - mergers, Comcast-Time Warner ... Jul 15, 8
  - Pay-TV ... Dec 15, 6
- Television sets
  - buying tips ... Nov 15, 38
  - large ... Feb 15, 16
  - quick shopping and setup ... Feb 15, 18
- Toilet paper ... Oct 15, 20; Dec 15, 6
- Toilets ... Mar 15, 26; Sep 15, 38
- Tools
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 54
- Trans fats, new FDA regulations on ... Oct 15, 9
- Travel
  - insurance, AmEx Travel ... May 15, 9
- Tree tools ... Oct 15, 18
- Trimmers, string ... May 15, 42
- Tuna, mercury in ... Jun 15, 11

V–Y

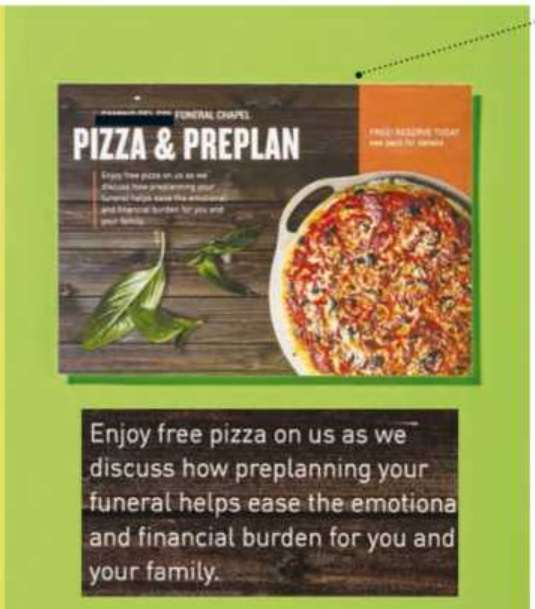
- Vaccines ... Oct 15, 12
- Vacuum cleaners ... Mar 15, 44; Nov 15, 22
  - robotic ... Jul 15, 48
- Video streaming ... Aug 15, 48
  - account sharing ... Mar 15, 16
  - choosing ... Sep 15, 13
- Washing machines ... Mar 15, 47; Nov 15, 18
  - balance problems ... Feb 15, 9
- Watches, smart ... Aug 15, 18
- Water conservation ... Jul 15, 14
- Weeds ... Jun 15, 12
- Wine consumption ... 19

Deadpan Humor

A funeral home that's plugging pizza, an ad for flowers that bug, and other product claims that gave our readers pause

Stopped Cold The flowers in this ad, sent in by a reader in Guymon, Okla., look lovely. They seem more like a threat once you start reading the description, which seems more plaguelike than pastoral.





Last Meal? Getting a group together to contemplate their mortality can be a tough sell, which may be why this funeral chapel mail ad, sent in by Sharon Drury of Surprise, Ariz., looks more like a pizza shop coupon.

More Lash Than Meets the Eye "I guess the lash inserts are extra!" marveled Robert Zavod of Haddam, Conn., at the small print in this ad, which reveals that Katy Perry's lashes were given a boost far bigger than you will get using just the mascara she is plugging.





15-Minute Warning Though this package, sent in by Marta Hiegel of Fairfield Bay, Ark., boasts that the side dish is "ready to eat" in 15 minutes, the cooking instructions are half-baked.

SHOW US THE GAFFES! Send us the goofs and glitches you find. Submit them for publication to SellingIt@cro.consumer.org or Selling It, Consumer Reports, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703.



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